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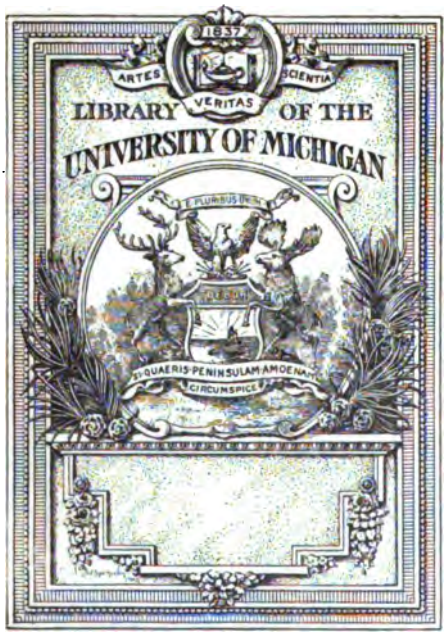
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# THE FLARE OF THE FOOTLIGHTS

# THE FLAKE OF THE FOOTLIGHTS

HORACE WYNHAM
author of
"Lucy the Actress," etc.

LONDON
E. GRANT RICHARDS
7 APOLLO STREET, W.
1907

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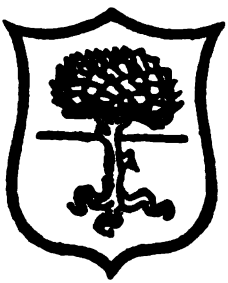
# THE FLARE OF THE FOOTLIGHTS

BY

HORACE WYNDHAM

Author of
"Audrey the Actress," etc.



LONDON
E. GRANT RICHARDS
7 CARLTON STREET, S.W.
1907

*"The curtain falls, the play is played:—*
*The beggar packs beside the beau:*
*The monarch troops, and troops the maid;*
*The thunder huddles with the snow.*
*Where are the revellers high or low?*
*The clashing swords? the lovers' call?*
*The dancers gleaming row on row?*
*Into the night go one and all."*

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# I

THE well-chosen and perfectly served dinner over, Adrian Merrick leaned back in his chair and puffed slowly at the cigar which the obsequious waiter had suggested was the only brand that a young gentleman who really respected himself would order. As it cost something like a shilling an inch, Adrian felt that he was entitled to enjoy it at his leisure and to ignore the pointed, but tactfully expressed, hint of the spruce *maître d'hôtel* hovering in the doorway that he should vacate his table for other patrons. The surroundings pleased him, and he had ten minutes to fill in before the next item on the evening's programme he had mapped out for himself should really make it necessary to think about leaving.

From the corner where he was sitting he could command an uninterrupted view of the entire room. Its appointments appealed to his artistic instincts. Most of the big London restaurants which he had visited during the last few days resembled so many glorified gin-palaces, where, amid a profusion of red velvet and glittering mirrors, inferior cooking was served up to the strains of a noisy band of gaudily dressed aliens. Here, however, it was quite different. From the softly shaded lights, casting a mellow glow over the tables crowded with well-groomed men and pretty women, to the delicate rose-pink of the carpet, everything was designed to please the senses. The hum of laughter and talk blended harmoniously with the strains of a properly modulated orchestra, and there was even a rhythm in the rustle of silk-lined skirts as their wearers moved to and fro.

Through the glass doors opening on to the big winter garden, where those who had already dined were discussing coffee and liqueurs, Adrian caught an occasional glimpse of the scarlet-coated musicians ensconced in a palm-shaded alcove. He recognized the air they were playing. It was Raff's "Cavatina," and he heaved a sigh of relief. Since his return to London it had seemed to him that restaurant bands were not capable of any higher flight than a cake-walk.

He looked critically round the big room, hoping to see a face that he knew there. Among all the crowd of men and women, however, there was no one with whom he was acquainted even by sight. The circumstance made him wish that he had not elected to dine alone. It would have been much more amusing to have brought a friend, some one able to tell him who all the celebrities were. The Amphitryon, he knew, usually attracted a more interesting set of people than any other establishment. It was chiefly on this account, indeed, that he had decided to go there that evening. After three years' absence from England, however, it was absurd, he told himself, to expect to find things unaltered. In a place where the tide of life flowed so fast, the men and women who had been in the public eye when he left London were naturally succeeded by others now. The great restaurant itself was brand new, and occupied a plot of ground on which only a year ago had stood a row of old-fashioned shops, looking sadly out of place in such an ultra-fashionable district. Adrian remembered them well; they had been familiar landmarks to him in his boyhood. His first watch was purchased in one of them, and his outfit when he went to Eton had come from a second. Undoubtedly, London was changed very much from what it was when he last knew it.

As he finished his Chartreuse the deep booming of a clock outside floated in through the window which the warm May evening had rendered it possible to keep open without subjecting those sitting near it to a chill. Adrian counted

the strokes. There were eight of them. It was time, accordingly, to think of making a move if he meant to carry out the arrangements he had determined on for getting through the rest of the evening. He took a small square envelope from his pocket and looked at the stall ticket that nestled there. Accompanying it was a slip of paper, with a polite intimation to the effect that the management would esteem it a favour if the audience would be in their seats by half-past eight.

It was the first night of a new piece at the Embankment Theatre, produced under the auspices of Mrs. Bellingham—the most beautiful woman, and at once (according to the somewhat divided opinions of the critical fraternity) the best and the worst leading lady on the London stage—and Adrian Merrick had bought a stall for it. In doing so he was repeating an experiment, for the Embankment was the last theatre he had visited before he went abroad. Then, as now, it was the same actress who headed the company there. He thought over the coincidence while his cab bowled along Piccadilly. It awakened a train of memories.

Grace Bellingham was inseparably bound up in Adrian's mind with his few recollections of playgoing. She was the first actress whom he had seen. Although it was ten years ago now, and he had been a boy of fourteen at the time, he remembered the event, and the appeal that her beauty and charm made to his youthful fancy, as though it was yesterday. Her performance had held him spellbound for weeks afterwards, and he had thought that such a glorious creature must surely be a visitor from another world. It seemed impossible that she could be a mere woman like the thousands of others he passed in the streets every day. Since then he had seen her several times—for whenever he had been offered the opportunity of going to the theatre he had always elected to patronize the one where she was appearing—but the earliest memory was still the strongest. He smiled a little as he thought of his boyish enthusiasm, and wondered if he would be disillusioned to-night. He

expected to be so, for his judgment had matured a good deal of late. Indeed, he was quite prepared to find his erstwhile divinity commonplace.

The Embankment Theatre, where Mrs. Bellingham was inaugurating another season on this particular evening, occupied a site adjoining the Strand approach to Waterloo Bridge. Prior to Mrs. Bellingham's tenancy the building had stood empty for months. It possessed a somewhat unfortunate reputation as an "unlucky" house, and speculators desirous of exploiting theatrical enterprises were rather inclined to give it the cold shoulder. A long record of failures was associated with the place, and three adventurous lessees had already made their appearance in the Bankruptcy Court. From its position immediately overlooking the river, and the nature of its visitors during the greater part of the year, the house was commonly known as the "Seagulls' Retreat."

The advent of Mrs. Bellingham, however, changed everything. Ascertaining, by means of judicious inquiries through a second party, that she could buy the theatre outright on extremely easy terms, she entered into possession without a moment's delay. As soon as the necessary transfer papers were signed, she consulted an architect and turned an army of workmen into the building with instructions to renovate it completely. The contractors to whom the task was entrusted acquitted themselves of it in a manner that left little to be desired. As a preliminary step the house was pulled down and a brand new one, constructed in accordance with the latest principles, rose phœnix-like from its dust and debris. On the building and its appointments neither money nor trouble was spared. The word had gone forth that everything was to be of the best, and all that artistic taste—in combination with paint and gilding and luxurious upholstery—could achieve was abundantly exemplified in the new house. For the drop-curtain the brush of an eminent R.A. had (at really fabulous terms according to the host of preliminary paragraphs announcing the fact) been secured, and

the colour scheme of the whole interior eclipsed the most ambitious efforts that had hitherto been attempted elsewhere. The seating accommodation embodied every new device for the comfort of its occupants that ingenuity could suggest, and an impressionable lady journalist described the auditorium as a "symphony in silk." In fact, the Embankment in its remodelled form was the last word in theatrical architecture.

When she entered into her tenancy of the new building Grace Bellingham was at the height of her power. Time had dealt lightly with her, and at thirty-five she was, if anything, even more beautiful than she had been at twenty, while the years she had spent on the stage had transformed her from a raw, but withal charming, amateur into at least a passable actress. Her "following" was a large one, and as a manageress she made more money, if less artistic reputation, than any of her rivals. Like every one else, however, she occasionally experienced spells of ill-luck, but these were few and far between. One of her most valuable assets was the possession of a *flair* for what was likely to prove popular, and for this she catered on a liberal scale. Just now the public taste lay in the direction of costume-drama. Her opening attraction, accordingly, was a piece of this nature written by Harrison Elliott—a fashionable playwright who had gravitated on to the stage via a clerkship in a City glue factory—and entitled "Whitehall." It purported to give an authentic representation of Court life and manners in the days of what cultured critics unanimously termed the "Merry Monarch." As the piece lent itself to particularly gorgeous mounting, and moreover served as an admirable vehicle for the display of some specially elaborate costume which she intended to wear, Mrs. Bellingham naturally had great hopes of it.

A long line of carriages and cabs drawn up in a blaze of light outside the building, with a stream of interested onlookers watching their occupants being discharged, showed Adrian that he had not arrived too early. On either side

of the handsome foyer—which, with its pleasantly subdued cream and gold decorations and softly shaded electric lamps, offered a charming contrast to the gaudy brilliancy that obtained in the majority of the neighbouring theatres—stood a couple of imposing attendants in powdered hair, knee breeches, and silk stockings. As he passed them he stood still for a moment to watch the animated throng that filled the entrance and filed slowly towards the staircase. Mrs. Bellingham's *premières*, he knew, always attracted a specially distinguished audience, and this one certainly seemed no exception. Some of the people he recognized, from the frequency with which their portraits appeared in the illustrated papers, as social or artistic celebrities. Seeing them at such close quarters made him feel for the moment almost as though he were behind the scenes. A duchess trod on his toes, and a famous author apologized for brushing against him at the top of the marble staircase. Glancing over the brilliantly lit-up house a few minutes later from his seat in the stalls, he noted that Royalty was in one of the boxes, while all round him so far as he could see were row upon row of smart, well turned out men and magnificently dressed women. Although he himself was unaware of it, the eyes of some of the nearest among the latter rested on him with evident approval. With his slim figure and clear-cut regular features Adrian Merrick was one of the best-looking men in the whole audience. A tan on his cheeks spoke of prolonged residence abroad, and, young as he was, a certain squareness of jaw suggested a determination to succeed against any difficulties that might arise.

The orchestra crashed out the opening bars of a pretentious overture—specially written for the occasion by the pet composer of the moment—and a look of expectancy settled down on everybody's face. As the noisy strains died away, the rustling of programmes and swish of fans ceased abruptly. Conversation dropped to a subdued murmur, and then, as the heavy crimson curtains masking the

stage were drawn aside, stopped altogether. Almost before the audience quite realized it the business of the play commenced.

To Adrian the opening scenes proved rather boring, and before very long he found himself wondering why he had taken the trouble to come. Without being in any way hypercritical, he could not help thinking that the piece was remarkably badly written, and certainly unworthy of the lavish mounting accorded it. The dialogue, for example, was stilted in the extreme, and the different situations, led up to with such elaboration, failed to move him in the least. Everything was artificial and untrue to life, while most of the incidents were, so it seemed to him, also untrue to history. The piece might just as well have been entitled "Whitechapel" as "Whitehall." Then the company, as a whole, was distinctly disappointing. Scarcely any of its members had, in his opinion, a spark of real talent. The performance they gave was essentially undistinguished, only two or three out of the entire cast-list rising above mediocrity. The most notable exception was that of a girl who, although she had a somewhat subordinate part, contrived to invest it with a certain amount of individuality. Her appearance, too, was charming, and Adrian looked at his programme with interest to find out her name. It was Constance Assheton. He wondered if it had been assumed for the occasion.

Mrs. Bellingham did not make her first entrance until well on towards the middle of the act. When she came on from the back of the crowded stage, and, moving to the centre with an air of easy assurance, stood still for a moment in a broad beam of limelight, acknowledging the thunders of applause that greeted her, Adrian felt his pulses beating a little faster. He focussed his glasses on her carefully, eager to ascertain how she would strike his mature judgment. The result of a brief inspection convinced him that, if anything, she had improved. There was a ripeness about her glorious beauty now that was new to him. Beside her

every one else seemed commonplace. While she waited for the wave of hand-clapping to cease, a smile of evident pleasure on her half-parted lips and eyes that sparkled with conscious triumph, he thought she looked radiant. The secret of her remarkable popularity appeared quite comprehensible. That the play was dull, and the support accorded the leading lady generally poor, did not matter in the least. All that the audience wanted was Grace Bellingham. From the warmth of the reception greeting her entrance she might have been the most talented actress that ever yet faced the footlights.

At the end of the act Adrian went up into the back of the dress circle to smoke a cigarette. The room was full of men, and every one was talking of the play. From the scraps of conversation that he caught, the general impression seemed to be that it was not a success. As he made his way towards a vacant seat, he suddenly heard himself hailed by a familiar voice. Looking up in surprise—for he had not expected to see any one he knew—a man came up to him with outstretched hand.

"My dear Merrick," he exclaimed, "fancy coming across you here! I thought you were still in South Africa."

"No, I returned to England, home, and beauty a fortnight ago, I'm glad to say, and am going to stop here. But what are you doing with yourself, Marchmont? I haven't seen you since we left Eton together. You never wrote, you ruffian."

Douglas Marchmont laughed lightly.

"My dear chap," he returned, "I'm always writing. The fact is, having been a failure at everything else, I've taken to journalism in my old age. At present I'm dramatic critic of the 'Evening Herald.'"

"When's the inquest?"

Marchmont grinned.

"Thanks, but the paper's pretty robust, my polite young friend. What do you think of the piece, though? So far it strikes me as funny without being vulgar."

Adrian reflected for a moment. The description was not a bad one.

"I haven't thought very much about it as yet. No doubt, though, you'll do it justice."

"I propose to do it mercy, and that's more than most of my critical friends will. Seriously, it's pretty rotten, isn't it?"

"I've seen better," was the guarded admission.

"And what about the acting?" went on the other. "I never saw such a crew of barnstormers in all my born days."

"Well, they won't set the Thames on fire just yet, certainly. Still, Mrs. Bellingham's wonderful."

"By Jove, you're right!" was the reply. "She'll pull the piece through if any one can. The woman's a marvel, simply. Have you forgotten our dreadful pasts, or do you remember when you and I once came up from Eton for the afternoon to visit a dentist and went to see her in 'Delilah' instead?"

"Rather! My old governor happened to be in the stalls and spotted me in the pit. He wrote to the Head about it, and it was nearly a week before I could sit down comfortably again."

"Heavens! what a long time ago that seems now," observed Marchmont reflectively. "But tell me more about your noble self. What are you doing here at all? Why have you chucked the Cape? Have you come into a fortune?"

"Not exactly. As a matter of fact, though, my uncle died three months ago and left me some cash. I suppose the old chap thought it would melt if he took it with him. Anyway, I came in for it, and as England's a jolly sight better place than South Africa, I've come back."

Marchmont looked at his friend enviously.

"Lucky devil! What are you going to do now? Join the Idle Rich, I suppose?"

Adrian laughed.

"Well, as I've only got about £250 a year to do it on I shall have to take a few lessons. Can you give me some?"

"I'm afraid not. Come and have a talk after the show to-night, though. As I have to go to the 'Herald' office first

with my notice, wait for me. I'm in my old rooms in Hill Street, Berkeley Square."

"All right," returned the other. "I'll be glad to have a chat. Now I must be off to see the rest of this high class piece.'

An electric bell tinkled warningly as he spoke, and there was a general move towards the stalls and circle. Marchmont disappeared in company with a brother critic, and Adrian realized that it was time to get back to his seat if he wished to ascertain what further developments the talented author had in store. He was not particularly curious on this point, however, but he wanted to see Mrs. Bellingham again. Also, although he scarcely acknowledged it, he wanted to see Constance Assheton.

The last three acts did not impress him any more favourably than the first one. There was no getting away from the fact that Mr. Harrison Elliott's work left a good deal to be desired. Adrian felt certain that he could have written a better play himself. With the easy assurance of twenty-four he knew exactly where this one failed. Three facts divided among four acts was not a sufficient allowance on which to build up an evening's entertainment; the principal incident made too great a strain on the imagination; none of the characters were in the least sympathetic; and, finally, the scene-painter and costumier dominated everything. Each episode appeared to have been dragged on by main force in order to show off an effective setting. The tapping of the stage-carpenter's hammer could almost be heard rising above the dramatist's dialogue. The quality of this, too, was extremely thin, while, judging from the frequency of the silent intervals that took place, it was also limited in quantity. There scarcely seemed, indeed, enough to go round.

When at last the final curtain fell on a gorgeously arranged tableau, depicting Mrs. Bellingham surrounded by the entire company, Adrian waited where he was, curious to see how the audience would express its opinion. He turned round

and glanced instinctively at the sea of faces in the densely packed pit, for he knew that it was on the verdict of that section of the house that the success or failure of the piece really depended. In the stalls—as also in the dress circle and boxes—almost every one was obviously a friend of the management, and their applause accordingly counted for very little. The patrons of the unreserved portions, however, admitted no obligation to anybody. They were not particularly enthusiastic, he thought, and it was in response to a very mild demand indeed that the curtain was raised and the leading members of the company came on one at a time to bow their acknowledgments. Mrs. Bellingham's own appearance, however, after every one else had withdrawn, met with a most cordial reception. Still, it was evident that the approval accorded her was intended as a personal tribute, and not as a token of appreciation of the play. Indeed, when—after a somewhat lukewarm invitation from the gallery—the author appeared before the footlights (with a promptitude that suggested he had been waiting in the wings for the purpose) he was greeted with derisive cheers. Judging from the expansive smile on his face, however, he was quite satisfied with himself. He might have been Shakespeare and Sardou rolled into one. His smug complacency, indeed, made Adrian rather want to kick him.

# II

IT was a fine night when he reached the open air again, and, after three hours in an overheated atmosphere, Adrian thought that it would be pleasanter to walk than to drive. Ignoring, accordingly, the persistent offers of the army of cab touts that swarmed round the portico and reaped a harvest of coppers from those who were not sufficiently strong-minded to send them about their business, he made his way past the great barrack-like hotel that adjoined the theatre and emerged into the Strand. His rooms were in Down Street, but before going there he meant to look up his friend Marchmont.

Although occasional letters had passed between them, until the chance meeting that evening they had not seen one another since they had both left Eton. Douglas Marchmont was the elder by nearly three years. On leaving Sandhurst, he joined a "smart ragging regiment," as he expressed it, retiring, however, shortly afterwards, "because there was no immediate prospect of a vacancy for an active and intelligent field-marshal." After the Army he went to the Bar. It was not long, however, before he got tired of waiting for briefs. Casting about for some more remunerative form of employment he drifted into journalism, and eventually became a dramatic critic. It was in this capacity that he had gone to the first night at the Embankment.

Adrian walked through the comparatively quiet streets, his mind full of the play he had just witnessed. A vision of Grace Bellingham's beautiful face rose up before him. He laughed a little to himself as he thought of his boyish in-

fatuation. She was beautiful still, certainly—more beautiful, if anything, than she had been ten years ago when he last saw her; but she no longer appealed to him in the same manner. Her performance that evening had revealed something of her nature, and he had realized that it was not a pleasant one. Instinctively, he knew her for a syren—a woman who would stop at little or nothing to gain her own ends. He thought of all the stories that were rife about her. Some of them were distinctly uncomplimentary. Whether there was any truth in them or not he neither knew nor cared. Marchmont would probably be able to tell him the latest details.

As he turned into Berkeley Square from Piccadilly a motor passed him rapidly. The erratic fashion in which it was being driven attracted his attention, and he paused beside a convenient lamp-post to watch it. As it came into the broad circle of light he saw from the chauffeur's flushed face and the way he was swaying about in his seat that the man was not entirely sober. A constable, in whom the same train of thought had apparently been awakened, emerged from the shadow of a doorway and looked suspiciously after the receding car. Then he glanced at Adrian.

"That chap will come to grief in a moment, sir," he observed. "He's chipped a bit off the wall of Devonshire House already, and if he isn't careful he'll run straight into the railings. There's a lady in the car, too. Hullo!" he added, as the sound of a crash, followed by a feminine cry of alarm, broke the stillness a moment later, "he's done it!"

Adrian pricked up his ears at the noise of the collision, and, followed by the policeman, hurried towards the scene of the accident. At the corner of the square they saw the car —a luxuriously fitted up landaulet—jammed against the railings. Beside it stood the chauffeur, an alcoholic grin on his face, fumbling stupidly with the steering-gear. A lady in evening dress, with a lace mantle round her shoulders, was speaking to him in French. Judging from the tone she

employed she was not saying anything complimentary. Something about her figure seemed familiar. As she turned at the sound of the approaching footsteps, Adrian recognized her as Mrs. Bellingham.

"For goodness sake come and help me!" she exclaimed imploringly. "This drunken beast of a chauffeur has done his best to kill me. I believe he's ruined the car, too."

Adrian, who knew something about motors, looked it over carefully, while Mrs. Bellingham addressed the policeman on the subject of the driver's misconduct.

"I don't think it's much damaged," he remarked, after a brief inspection. "At any rate, it's fit to take you home."

Mrs. Bellingham glanced at him with interest. The result of her scrutiny seemed satisfactory, for she favoured him with a radiant smile.

"So many thanks. All the same, I daren't trust this ruffian to drive me again. Besides, I want him locked up."

The policeman, scenting a "case," saluted respectfully, and laid a detaining hand on the chauffeur's arm.

"You'll charge him with being drunk, I suppose, madam?"

"Yes, of course. Here's my card."

"Very good. I'll send some one from the station to look after the motor if you don't mind waiting a few minutes. I'd better take this fellow off with me now, though."

At the reference to himself the chauffeur for the first time began to exhibit a little interest in the proceedings. The stupid grin died out of his face, and he assumed a threatening attitude. As Adrian moved a step nearer, ready to give any assistance that might be required, he turned on him quickly.

"Vat you mean?" he demanded, with a truculent gesture. "English pig-dog! Me drunk? Vat for? *Conspuez les Anglais—Vive les Boers!* Goddam!"

For answer, the policeman laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Better language, Frenchy, or you'll be getting a thick lip! Now, then, young fellow-my-lad, you just come along

with me quiet. You and your motors, indeed—I wouldn't trust you with a blooming wheelbarrow!"

As the ex-driver was led off, proclaiming at the top of his voice in rapid French various highly uncomplimentary opinions respecting his employer, Mrs. Bellingham spoke to Adrian again.

"It's really awfully good of you to have turned up. I should have died of fright in another minute."

He waved the suggestion away.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about. After all, no great damage has been done. Beyond a few paint scratches the car's all right."

"How nice of you to reassure me! I wish I knew how to get home, though. I don't want to spend the rest of the night in the middle of Berkeley Square."

Adrian smiled sympathetically. The other's tone seemed so tragic. For his own part he was finding the adventure rather interesting. Suddenly an idea occurred to him.

"I say," he began diffidently. Then he stopped short, not quite certain if he should finish his speech or not.

"Well, what do you say? Something very much to the point, I'm sure."

"I know how to drive, and if you'll let me do so, I'll be delighted to take you home."

Mrs. Bellingham beamed with gratitude.

"Will you really? It would be charming of you if you would. I live in Hans Mansions—just at the corner of Hans Place. You're sure it's not too much trouble, though?"

"Quite."

Taking the hand held out towards her she pressed it gratefully, and entered the car again. Adrian settled himself in the vacant seat, and a moment later they were gliding smoothly out of the square. As they started off, his companion glanced at him out of the corner of her fine eyes. The look of alarm that had been there a few minutes ago was gone, and in its place was one of mingled interest and amusement.

"By the way, you don't know who it is that you're rescuing from distress so nicely."

"Oh, yes I do. You're Mrs. Bellingham."

"Quite right. But how did you know it? A brain wave, or what?"

"I was at the Embankment this evening and saw you."

Mrs. Bellingham gave a pleased laugh.

"Well, I hope you don't feel that your evening was wasted."

"Not now, at any rate," returned Adrian tranquilly. He was beginning to think that his companion was more attractive off the stage than on it. She looked as though she were about to say something, and he turned towards her inquiringly. As he did so the car bumped rather violently over a stone, the existence of which the lamps had not revealed. At the impact she clutched his arm sharply, nestling with a quick movement against his side, her white set face almost touching his. A handkerchief—a little square of filmy lace with a faint odour of roses clinging to it—fell from her bodice. Mechanically he picked it up and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, as he turned to grasp the brake. A soft tendril of her hair escaped its fastening and swept his cheek; the lace mantle round her neck drifted across his shoulders; and the insidious perfume of the flowers she was wearing crept into his nostrils. The contact of her soft warm body sent the blood galloping through his pulses, and for the moment he felt a wild desire to take her in his arms and soothe her. He would have done so, had she not suddenly drawn back with what seemed to him an expression of disappointment.

"Please forgive me," she said penitently. "The fact is, my nerves are still rather upset. I'm afraid you'll think me an awful coward."

"Not a bit of it. To be driven through Piccadilly by a drunken hooligan is enough to frighten anybody. You'll be back in less than five minutes now."

"Don't hurry," she answered softly; "I'm enjoying this very much."

Adrian felt inclined to answer that, had it rested with himself, he would have prolonged the journey all night, but he scarcely liked to do so. He contrived, however, to go by the most roundabout way he could think of. Mrs. Bellingham, for her part, seemed quite satisfied, and when he deliberately overshot the entrance to Hans Mansions and headed straight for the Cromwell Road, she made no comment. It was not until the gaunt outlines of the Earl's Court Exhibition were in sight that she said anything at all. Then, however, she asserted herself.

"This is delightful, but would you mind taking me home now? I've got some people coming to luncheon to-morrow, and they'd be disappointed if I weren't back. We'll have a drive together another day, perhaps."

"I beg your pardon," stammered Adrian, glad that the darkness hid his blushes, "but I'm afraid I've taken the wrong turning." He steered the car round as he spoke, and drove back without a word. Ten minutes later he brought it up at its destination. The hall porter ran out and looked at them inquiringly as they stood together on the pavement. Mrs. Bellingham was the first to speak.

"Take the car to the garage, please, and tell them I want a new chauffeur to-morrow morning." Then she turned to Adrian, who, hat in hand, was waiting to say good night.

"Come in and have a whisky and soda and a cigarette. You deserve one for looking after me so nicely."

"I'm afraid it's very late."

"Not a bit of it. I don't believe it's more than half-past twelve. Of course, if you don't want to, though——"

The disdainful shrug of her glistening shoulders decided him.

"I'll be delighted."

Mrs. Bellingham's face became wreathed with smiles again.

"That's right. Then come along."

She led the way into a small room opening off the entrance hall and switched on a single electric light. Adrian, following, saw that it was furnished as a dining-room. With its Sheraton sideboard and delicate china, its soft brick-red carpet and silken curtains, it looked extremely comfortable. There were only two or three pictures on the walls, but they had evidently been chosen with taste. In a corner by the bay window was a large bureau, through the glass-panelled doors of which could be seen a row of books. From their paper covers they seemed French ones. A copper bowl filled with narcissi stood on the mantelpiece, flanked by numerous photographs in silver frames. The majority, he noted—and the fact surprised him a little—were of men. Other flowers —roses chiefly—were arranged in slender vases on the centre table under a hanging lamp of wrought iron, and made the air heavy with their perfume.

His hostess brought a spirit case and syphon from their shelf and came towards her guest, her eyes smiling into his.

"Here's your reward," she exclaimed brightly. "I'm sure you've earned it."

"Thanks," he returned, raising the glass, as the soda hissed against the side.

"You must have a cigarette as well," she continued, opening a silver box lined with cedar wood. "These are quite nice. Shall I shock you very much if I indulge in one, too? Anyway, I'm going to risk it."

"Please do. I can supply matches."

Mrs. Bellingham drew up a deep-seated arm-chair and settled herself in it with a luxurious sigh. She blew a thin cloud of smoke from her lips, and glanced furtively in her guest's direction.

"This is very unconventional, I'm afraid."

"It's very nice."

"Thank you. By the way, though, I don't yet know who it is that I'm thanking? Please forgive my feminine curiosity and tell me your name."

"It's Adrian Merrick."

"Merrick? I believe I know that name. Are you one of the Merricks of Brandon, by any chance?"

"I'm afraid I'm one of the Merricks of Nothing at All—or very near it. My father was in the Navy—a captain—but he died years ago. I don't think I've any relatives living now, except a few distant cousins."

"And how old are you, Mr. Merrick? It's abominably rude of me to ask, but I want to know."

"Twenty-four."

Mrs. Bellingham shot a swift glance of what looked remarkably like envy.

"Lucky boy!" she replied softly. "But tell me some more about yourself," she added in another tone. "I'm frightfully interested. I want to know if you often rescue distressed females?"

Adrian laughed.

"Not very often. Why do you ask, though?"

"Because you do it so nicely. I'm sure you must have had lots of practice! I wonder why I haven't seen you before, though?"

"I expect it's because I've only just come to London. For the last three years I've been in South Africa, trying to make a fortune out of ostrich farming. The attempt wasn't wildly successful. As a matter of fact, the firm I was connected with went bankrupt about two months ago. Just then an uncle of mine was considerate enough to die and leave me a little money. The Cape's only fit for Kaffirs to live in, so I came home by the next boat."

"You're not sorry, I suppose?"

He looked at her steadily.

"Not now."

Mrs. Bellingham made a gesture of deprecation. She did not seem annoyed, however.

"If you weren't so absurdly young, as well as being so extremely self-possessed, I should almost think you were trying to pay me a compliment! Now, tell me, what are

your plans for the future? I gather that you haven't got enough to live on without employment of some sort."

"Not nearly. I'm very anxious to find something. I thought of trying journalism, only—as I happen to have gone to a public school instead of to a board one, and have a sneaking fondness for English grammar—I doubt if any newspaper proprietor would give me a billet."

"I'm quite sure of it. You must think of something else."

Adrian was silent. Mrs. Bellingham had touched upon a subject that had been occupying his thoughts a good deal of late. It was one that he meant to consult his friend Marchmont about. He would have to do so to-morrow, now.

His hostess leaned forward a little in her chair and looked at him critically. The inspection seemed satisfactory, for her lips parted in a smile of approval as she drew back again a moment later. Adrian knew instinctively that she was thinking of him, but he was at a loss to understand what it was in his appearance that pleased her so much.

"Tell me," she said, breaking the silence that had settled down, "have you ever thought of the stage?"

"Often."

"Please be serious. I'm in earnest. My piece to-night won't be any great success, I'm afraid. It will have to come off before very long, anyway, because I've arranged a provincial tour. While I'm in the country I mean to try a new comedy that I've had by me for the last year. There's a part in it that I think you could play very nicely. You've got just the right figure and appearance for it. How does the idea strike you, though?"

Adrian's face lit up with pleasure. His companion's words had opened before him an unexpected avenue, and one which promised to be a very pleasant one to journey along. He was not particularly keen on acting for its own sake—regarding it, indeed, as rather an undignified sort of employment for a man; but to go on the stage under the auspices of Mrs.

Bellingham was a different thing altogether. At the moment he could think of nothing more delightful.

"I should be charmed," he exclaimed. "It's most kind of you to suggest it. Do you think I'll suit you, though?"

"I shouldn't ask you if I didn't. Now, come and lunch with me at two o'clock on Thursday—the day after to-morrow—and we'll talk it over comfortably."

He held out his hand, and she pressed it softly, her dark eyes shining.

"You won't forget the appointment, Mr. Merrick?"

"I couldn't."

Adrian walked back to his rooms through the silent and deserted streets, strange thoughts crowding thick and fast upon him. It was only two hours since he had left the theatre, but the brief interval had been pregnant with what he vaguely felt were great events.

Searching for his latch-key as he paused on the doorstep, he felt something soft and filmy in his waistcoat pocket, with a faint perfume of roses clinging to it. He drew it out and saw that it was a woman's handkerchief, with the monogram "G.B." embroidered in one corner.

"Now how the devil did that get into my pocket?" he asked himself, wonderingly.

Suddenly he remembered, and laughed softly as he did so.

Then his face grew grave again.

"I wonder if there's a Mr. Bellingham about? There generally is."

# III

TO anyone interested in theatrical matters, the histrionic career of Grace Bellingham presented a curious study. Of mixed American and Irish parentage, she combined in her temperament the shrewdness of the former nation with all the personal charm of the latter. She had the face of a little wax Madonna, and the business instincts of a successful company promoter. When she sought to embark on a more than usually shady scheme for the feathering of her own nest at the expense of other people, she invariably contrived to fix the responsibility on her "syndicate." The astute Hebrew gentlemen—Messrs. Eckstein, Riesling, and Rudescheimer, and the other eminent financiers with names like the labels on hock bottles—composing this mysterious body winked solemnly at one another when this happened, and remarked with broad grins that "what Mrs. B. didn't know about theatrical management wasn't worth knowing." On the conclusive evidence of the advertisement columns of all the different papers in London possessing the largest circulation in the world she derived her sylph-like figure from Robinson's corsets, her peach-bloom complexion from Brown's soap, and her splendid health from Smith's pills. Without the inclusion of her house therein, no series of the "Homes of Famous British Actresses" was complete, and her name was in large type on the programme of every fashionable charity matinée.

Of this distinguished lady's private life very little was known, if only for the reason that—thanks to the assiduousness of Mr. Raphael Montagu, the enterprising press-agent

(who figured on the theatre's salary list as "secretary")—she did not possess such an article. From the hour in the morning when she got up, to the one in the evening when she retired for the night, she lived in a veritable blaze of publicity. Her dresses, her jewels, her dogs, her cats, her motors, and her schemes generally formed the material of countless newspaper paragraphs, and she had a standing engagement at a Bond Street photographer's three times a week all the year round to meet the demand for her portrait. There was nothing from which she could not derive valuable advertisement. If she produced a new play, full-page interviews with her appeared everywhere; and if she did not, there were at least half-page ones. A highly popular item of intelligence credited her with possessing a solid gold bath (which in the provincial versions was invariably studded with diamonds); and another, which no self-respecting column of "Dramatic Chit-Chat" could afford to overlook, informed breathless readers that she had the finest collection of postage stamps of any actress in London. According to the society papers she was engaged to be married to a different peer twice a month; and every time that a house was pulled down within half a mile of Piccadilly Circus, it was in order that an eminent financier might acquire the site for the purpose of building her a theatre. When things were slack (as occasionally happened in August) her chauffeur (reported in the Sunday papers to be a French marquis) would be fined for exceeding the speed limit, or two of her most ardent admirers would challenge one another to a duel on the sands at Boulogne.

According to the innumerable biographical notices respecting Mrs. Bellingham's career, she was daughter of a naval officer who had "served his country with distinction," and was the "bearer of an illustrious name." As a matter of strict fact, the patronymic of the gentleman in question was Silas P. Dodd, and his naval career had been comprised by a brief period of service in the capacity of assistant-purser on an Atlantic liner. An error (on the wrong side) in his accounts

had brought the engagement to an early termination. When this regrettable contretemps occurred Mr. Dodd retired to his native town of Chicago, where he found freer scope for his energies in the management of a gambling saloon. About the same time he married Bridget O'Brien, a pretty Irish emigrant to whose fascinations he had fallen victim on the eventful voyage which proved his last in the employ of the Three Star Line plying between New York and Liverpool. Had he only known it, this was the best day's work he ever did, for Mrs. Dodd, although only the daughter of a small farmer in Cork, was in every way her spouse's superior. When, ten years later, he died somewhat suddenly from what the coroner's jury called "natural causes" (but described by eye-witnesses of the event as a disturbance over a game of poker, in which an unsuccessful player "drew a bead" on him without previous warning), the widow moved to Boston, where, shortly afterwards, she married an hotel proprietor. Before doing so, however, she sent her daughter, then a child of nine, to her sister in Dublin.

Grace Dodd had inherited not only her Irish mother's remarkable beauty, but also a large measure of her American father's national "cuteness." When she chose to make use of it, she had a tongue that, as her admirers freely declared, would charm a bird off a bough. With all the apparent gentleness of the dove she combined the cunning of the serpent. By the time she was seventeen she had been engaged twice, changing her mind, however, at the critical moment on each occasion when the proposed settlements failed to reach a satisfactory figure. At twenty an impressionable Dublin jury awarded her fifteen hundred pounds damages in an action for breach of promise which she brought against an elderly peer, and at twenty-two that gentleman's heir presented her with another thousand for withdrawing a contemplated action against himself. Twelve months later she married Mr. Bellingham, in the belief that she was thereby allying herself to a gentleman of wealth and position.

Here, however, she made an unfortunate mistake. Mr. Bellingham, whom she had promised, in the costume of nun's veiling and orange blosoms, to love, honour, and obey so long as an all-wise Providence should be pleased to spare them to one another, showed himself a practical joker of the worst description. So far from being the managing director and part owner of the whisky distillery, whose famous blend proclaimed its merits on every Dublin hoarding, as he had led her to believe was the case, he was but a mere commercial traveller for the firm on a salary of five pounds a week. Then he added insult to injury by complaining that his bride's assurances that her father was an American millionaire were not based on any substantial foundation. When the angry lady, breathing fire and vengeance upon the man whose name she bore, went to consult her solicitor with a view to obtaining compensation, she derived very little satisfaction. The legal expert, indeed, at first treated the matter as a supreme jest, and then, when his fair client convinced him that she at any rate was very much in earnest, explained that the bringing of a charge of misrepresentation was a game that two could play at. To this she retorted that it was the most one-sided arrangement she had ever heard of, and flounced indignantly out of the office.

It was not long before Mrs. Bellingham's dazzling charms brought her plenty of offers from admirers anxious to have the honour of affording her that consolation which the Law denied. Her loveliness, indeed, was quite remarkable even in a country where pretty women were more common than plain ones. Every time she walked down the streets of Dublin—and she took care to do so frequently—she attracted an amount of attention that to any one else would have been embarrassing. Had she lived in the eighteenth century she would have been known as "the Beautiful Bellingham," and every little poetaster in the kingdom would have composed a rondel on her eyebrows, or a sonnet on the arch of her instep. But once bitten, the disappointed lady was now more than

twice shy, and at first she kept her host of masculine sympathisers—the members of her own sex declaring for the most part that "she had got just what she deserved"—at a discreet distance. In the end, however, the persistency of one of them prevailed. This was Sir Charles O'Grady, a sporting baronet, who possessed an enormous rent-roll and commanded a cavalry regiment quartered at the Curragh.

Unfortunately, Sir Charles omitted to explain in the first instance that he already had a wife, who happened to be living apart from him at the moment, and when he casually mentioned the matter later on, Mrs. Bellingham was accommodating enough not to regard the fact as an insuperable bar to the continuance of their acquaintanceship. Actuated, too, by a desire not to give unnecessary pain to so warm-hearted a friend, she was even more uncommunicative with regard to the existence of her own husband. Accordingly, when by a strange coincidence (after a good many previous meetings in Dublin during Mr. Bellingham's absence on business) she and the sporting baronet found themselves staying in the same hotel at Monte Carlo, they saw no reason why they should not enjoy one another's society. They might have continued doing so indefinitely had not Mr. Bellingham's employers suddenly taken it into their heads to send that gentleman southwards with a commission to introduce the firm's whisky among the different Riviera resorts.

To the keen disappointment of London and Dublin society, and the furious and openly expressed indignation of the Sunday newspapers (which were consequently compelled to fill their columns with less interesting matter), the greater part of the evidence at the divorce proceedings that followed was heard *in camera*. The amorous baronet's position and wealth, the sudden discovery that he had been married for years past, and the extraordinary beauty of Mrs. Bellingham, all contributed a special interest to the case. The approach to the court was blocked by a huge crowd (arranged in an orderly *queue*, with places for late comers therein kept by

district messenger boys at ninepence an hour) all anxious to catch fleeting glimpses of the lady as she arrived and left the building in her perfectly appointed brougham. Each of the five days that the case lasted saw her in two complete changes of costume, which had been made specially for the purpose by the most fashionable house in the Rue de la Paix. Street hawkers did a brisk business in the sale of a scurrilous pamphlet, written by an imaginative journalist and purporting to contain the "Life of Mrs. Bellingham," and the evening papers brought out new editions every quarter of an hour. Raucous-voiced newsboys raced up and down the streets from the printing offices, waving pink and green contents bills, and shouting "Bellingham Divorce Case—Latest Particulars—'Orrid and Revoltin' Details!" with much pecuniary profit to themselves. For the time being nothing else occupied the public mind. Despairing of attracting attention to herself in any other way, a member of the Gaiety chorus resigned her position and joined the Young Women's Christian Association. The morning papers, however, only accorded the stirring incident six lines.

The end came somewhat unexpectedly. Despite the fervent oratory of eminent counsel engaged to show that the respondent was an innocent and sorely tried lady, whose fair name and fame the vile machinations of the petitioner sought to besmirch, a hard-headed jury of British tradesmen were ungallant enough to return a verdict against her. Mr. Ferret, Q.C., scolded the foreman so severely that the learned judge was happily inspired to remark that, while he was aware that the distinguished leader had gained high mathematical honours at Cambridge, it was news to him that he was a *wrangler*. Having delivered himself of this brilliant *mot*, his lordship resumed the nap that the passage of arms between counsel and jury had interrupted.

Mrs. Bellingham passed out of court on the arm of the sulky but defiant Mr. Ferret. In the corridor she smiled sweetly at the gentleman who had secured his decree *nisi*

with so much trouble, and cut Sir Charles dead. Thereupon the worthy baronet tore up the cheque which, in a moment of remorse and chivalry combined, he had drawn to pay her expenses with, and returned to his regiment. Two days later he received a letter from his late acquaintance, asking him to send back a lock of her hair which she had once given him. Sir Charles replied by forwarding through a brother officer a boxful of assorted tresses, with a politely worded request that she would pick out her own. In the whole course of her life the Irish baronet was the only man who succeeded in getting the better of Grace Bellingham.

As was only to be expected of an individual who had been the heroine of such a *cause célèbre* as that of Bellingham *v.* Bellingham and O'Grady, the interesting respondent Mrs. Bellingham loomed very large in the public eye. When she got back to the private hotel she was staying at in Clarges Street, five reporters were waiting patiently on the doorstep to obtain her "impressions." There was also a reply-paid telegram from the editor of the "Perfect Lady," offering her twenty guineas to contribute an article on "How it Feels to be Divorced." Having sent the representatives of the Press away disappointed, and answered the telegram, *lowest terms fifty guineas—American rights reserved,* she slept peacefully until dinner time. By the last post that evening came eleven letters from theatrical managers inviting her to go on the stage. Five of these, which referred to provincial engagements, and three to music-hall ones, were promptly put in the fire. Mrs. Bellingham was quite aware of her own value, and had no intention of making herself cheap. The remaining three letters, however, demanded more attention. Each emanated from a responsible London management, and was, moreover, expressed in attractively business-like terms. The more she thought over it, the more the scheme appealed to her. Properly worked, there was money in it, and money—now that supplies had been cut off—would come in very useful just then. She looked thoughtfully at the trio of invitations again, trying to decide which it would

be best worth her while to accept. Had it been possible, she would have done so to all. Finally, she determined on acceding to the request of Mr. Eckstein, the lessee of the Pantheon Theatre, and wrote to say that she would grant him the interview he asked for at eleven o'clock the next morning.

# IV

THE Pantheon was the newest and most popular house in London, and Mr. Max Eckstein was the most astute lessee who ever launched a theatrical venture. Starting life as a call boy twenty years earlier in a less famous establishment, he had reached his present position by way of the box-office, to which department he had naturally gravitated as the one which afforded him the readiest means of handling money. While employed in this highly congenial capacity he had developed such keen business instincts and close attention to detail, that, when his immediate superior went off to America one fine morning without mentioning the fact to the manager beforehand, he was able to explain to the chartered accountant who overhauled the books exactly how the defalcations had been carried out. He was rewarded by being promoted to the vacant post, the duties of which he discharged with an aptitude that won him the admiration of the entire syndicate for whom he worked. From the management of the box-office to that of the theatre itself was something of a gulf, but the spruce young clerk contrived to bridge it before very long. His next step was to acquire a financial interest in a play which had been a remarkable failure in the country town where it was produced. Max Eckstein, however, possessed an infallible judgment, and knew that, if only given a proper chance, the piece would succeed. Securing the London rights of it on terms that practically made a loss of no consequence, he induced his employer to put the play up for a trial matinée. It ran for nearly three years, and enabled the two partners

to clear £20,000 apiece. With his share of the profits the budding entrepreneur rented another theatre and set up as a lessee on his own account.

As before, success again attended his efforts. Endowed with an unerring instinct for knowing exactly what the playgoing public wanted, he gave it that and nothing else. While his brother managers made experiments (and lost money), this one, with a wisdom beyond his years, dealt only in "certainties." Instead of attempting to coerce his patrons, he studied their tastes and met them to the full. He touched everything—from poetical drama to burlesque—and whatever was the mode of the moment—tragedy, comedy, or knockabout farce—he supplied on a first-class scale. It was his legitimate boast that he gave better value for money than any of his rivals, and he specially prided himself on having "no damned silly ideas about Art." As he eloquently put it, "he was not in the business for his health." He exploited the Drama as a commercial enterprise, not as an amiable hobby. If, as occasionally happened despite his remarkable shrewdness, a piece failed to attract, he never sought to bolster it up into a success. The moment the box-office returns fell below a certain figure previously determined upon, he took it off and tried a second. He drove hard bargains with authors, and harder ones still with actors and actresses. The natural result of rigid and unswerving adherence to these principles was that he speedily amassed a large fortune. For the rest, it may be said that, while he remembered his enemies, he forgot his friends, or rather, did not permit himself to make any.

In the recruiting of his companies Max Eckstein proceeded on the same sound business lines. Recognizing that certain performers were public favourites he engaged these, and took care that the fact was widely known. Whether they could act or not was the last thing he cared about. The only test of histrionic genius was, in his opinion, ability to attract an audience. For most actors and actresses, indeed, he had a supreme contempt, putting them on a level

with the people who came to see their performance. He knew to a sixpence the "drawing power" of every one who applied for a vacant post, and his salary list was calculated in strict accordance therewith. Any one who wanted more had to earn it.

Mr. Eckstein was a close student of the daily papers. However busy he might be, he found time to run his eye over the contents bills at any rate. The Press, from his point of view, was the public pulse, and required careful watching. To his habit of studying it and noting every change well in advance was due a considerable proportion of his large income. He had read all about the Bellingham case, and, with his usual foresight, had anticipated the verdict. Two hours before the newspaper boys were reaping an unsavoury harvest from the sale of special editions announcing it, he had made up his mind to write to Mrs. Bellingham. He knew that an enormous public would battle for the privilege of paying to see that interesting lady, and he resolved to be the medium through which their desire should be granted. That the same idea would certainly occur to a good many brother managers did not trouble him in the least. Before he went to bed that night he drew up a contract.

When his visitor rustled into his luxuriously furnished sanctum, a vision of beauty and hand-painted chiffon, an hour and a half after the appointed time, he got to business at once. What he had to offer was a six months' engagement at the Pantheon, with the right of extending it to three years. Mrs. Bellingham listened attentively, but with a far-away look in her violet eyes, as though the details referred to somebody else altogether.

Presently she stopped tracing a pattern on the carpet with the point of her Louis XV shoe.

"And what about terms?" she inquired softly. "I shall expect to be well paid, you know, if I demean myself by going on the stage."

Max Eckstein, who had taken the lady's measure very

thoroughly before the first two minutes of the interview were over, rubbed his plump white hands together and smiled.

"What do you say to twenty pounds a week?" he replied.

Mrs. Bellingham shook her graceful head with decision.

"Oh dear no!" she cooed softly. "Thirty-five pounds a week isn't half enough to offer me for learning a long Shakespearean part and having to spend every evening in a stuffy old theatre."

Mr. Eckstein smiled again.

"Dear lady," he remarked in his most benign accents, "it was forty I said; and I shan't want you to play in Shakespeare either."

Mrs. Bellingham began to look interested.

"Now you're talking," she replied. "But still, it isn't enough."

The manager smoothed out a contract form insinuatingly.

"Fifty pounds a week for six months certain isn't to be sneezed at," he observed in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Let me see—I'm not very good at figures—but that's three hundred a month, isn't it?"

Mr. Eckstein saw that he had met his match for once in his life, and the circumstance put him on his mettle. So far from being annoyed, however, he was rather pleased than otherwise.

"No, it isn't," he returned. "Come, suppose you tell me what your lowest figure is? We'll get along quicker that way."

Grace Bellingham contracted her pretty eyebrows, and glanced furtively round the room, trying to think what she might safely say. She did not want to spoil her chances by asking too much. On the other hand, she was equally anxious not to demand less than the manager, if properly handled, might be prepared to offer. From the luxurious appointments of the office—the thick Turkey carpet, the morocco-covered chairs, the inlaid bookcase, and the massive rosewood desk at which Eckstein sat regarding her with a

look of portentous gravity—it was evident that there was no stint of money. The only thing was how to attract it towards herself.

"I'll tell you to-morrow," she said at last.

Max Eckstein took up his hat, and looked significantly at the clock on the carved oak mantelpiece.

"You must tell me now," he declared. "In ten minutes' time Lady Knightsbridge is coming along. She's very much in the public eye just now on account of having been turned out of her club for cheating at bridge. I suppose you know that she lost the action for slander that she brought against the Princess Von Gluckstein? The papers are full of it, and she'll be no end of a draw."

Mrs. Bellingham rose to the bait.

"Dear me, you surely wouldn't have a cat like that Knightsbridge woman in your theatre, Mr. Eckstein?"

"Not if I can get you instead. Now then, what will you come for?"

"Sixty pounds a week."

"Very well. Here's your contract."

The prospective member of the Pantheon company took up the manager's silver pen and then put it down again.

"With extra for matinées, of course?" she observed gently.

Max Eckstein looked at her with open admiration, and laughed good-humouredly.

"Upon my word, you ought be in management yourself. Very well, have it your own way. Anything else?"

"Yes. You must send round to all the papers to say you're paying me three hundred a week."

"Of course. That's an understood thing. Is there any other business arrangement you'd care to suggest?"

"I don't think so. Oh, yes, there is, though. You must engage some nice men to support me."

"I'll send round to Exeter Hall for a consignment to be forwarded on approval. What about the women, though? Perhaps you'd like to run your eye over my cast-list?"

Grace Bellingham shook her head with decision.

"Never mind about the women," she returned indifferently. "Get who you like. The people will come to see me!"

Then she sailed out of the room, leaving the other gazing after her wonderingly.

"Upon my word," he muttered to himself in admiration, "but that dear lady knows how many beans make five if she knows nothing else!"

Despite the high price which his new recruit set on herself, the manager of the Pantheon felt that he had, nevertheless, done a good morning's work. He had secured a safe "draw" for an extended period on something like half the terms he had been prepared to pay. The engagement would, he knew perfectly well, bring him in a profit of nearly three hundred pounds a week, and he was only paying her sixty.

The wisdom of Mr. Eckstein's policy was abundantly justified of events. Mrs. Bellingham's debut as "Delilah," in a poetic drama of that name specially written around her personality by Mr. Christopher Blake (a young author who, according to a famous Scotch critic, "presented the genius of Shakespeare and Milton, wrapped up in the technique of Sardou and Scribe"), was the success of the season. Had the theatre been twice as large it would not have accommodated half the audience that was anxious to be present. The "House Full" boards were displayed nightly, and even tickets for "standing room only" were soon at a premium. Mayfair and Belgravia struggled for seats in the pit, and when by a bold stroke the manager abolished the gallery by the simple process of trebling the prices and calling that part of the house "extra upper circle" the overflow went there gladly.

That Mrs. Bellingham knew rather less about acting than the average occupant of the back row of a pantomime chorus did not matter in the slightest. She was simply irresistible in herself. Nor was it of any consequence that the play was the most pretentious mixture of bad blank verse and violent

melodrama conceivable, and that the company was second-rate in the extreme. As she had truly said, people came to see her. They would even have done so, declared Mr. Eckstein delightedly, if he had put her on in Punch and Judy.

Several times during the long run of the piece the manager was beset by anxious doubts as to whether it would be advisable or not to teach his leading lady the rudiments of her art. Strong as was the temptation to give her at least a little elementary instruction, he finally decided that to do so would be to impair her market value, for her very amateurishness was not the least of her charms. Besides, there was nothing to be really gained by it either. After all, actresses were common enough. He could get his pick of them for three pounds a week and upwards. Rather to his surprise and consternation, however, Mrs. Bellingham settled the matter for herself by suddenly developing a technical skill that no one had hitherto suspected. By the time she had been on the boards six weeks she was able to give a performance of considerably more than average merit, and long before the piece was withdrawn she had blossomed into a thoroughly capable actress. Clarence Pott, the eminent critic of the "Daily Courier," announced the fact in two columns of leaded type, and the Scotch experts on the leading weeklies began to take her seriously. The Pantheon lessee met the situation by extending her contract for another twelve months.

Grace Bellingham remained under Eckstein's banner for three years and a half, during which time her hold on the public grew stronger than ever. When the engagement finally terminated, she toured through the provinces on her own account, meeting with a measure of success that almost satisfied even her exalted ideas. On returning to London she had ten minutes' business conversation with her late manager. This resulted in the formation of a syndicate, headed by Eckstein, for her further exploitation. As the best means of accomplishing this highly desirable object, they built a brand new theatre, of a rather more gorgeous

type than any that had hitherto been seen, and installed her therein at the head of her own company.

From the first the enterprise prospered exceedingly, and before very long Mrs. Bellingham had made enough money to retire on if she wanted to do so. This, however, was the last thing that she wanted. At the end of fifteen years she was as fond of public admiration as she had been when she commenced her career. She lived for notoriety, and was shrewd enough to perceive that the theatre was the means which offered her most of it. If she could have done so safely she would have cut adrift from the syndicate altogether at an early period of its existence, for she found the process of earning money for other people exceedingly galling. Despite her undoubted popularity, however, she scarcely felt strong enough to take this extreme step. Besides, it was very convenient when things went wrong to have some one to fix the blame on and to bear the loss.

Mrs. Bellingham had almost as keen an intuition for a play that would draw as had Max Eckstein himself. Her first venture was an English translation of a phenomenally successful Scotch novel. As a Newhaven fishwife—in a costume designed by M. Worth—she was the rage of an entire season. A four-act drama, in which all the characters were dukes and duchesses (except two or three who were earls and countesses), followed. As it was from the pen of a Hebrew gentleman, of mixed German and American extraction, and dealt entirely with the private lives of the nobility, it was naturally accepted as a standard contribution to the higher type of the British drama. Mrs. Bellingham, to her credit, frankly described the work as "piffle," but she felt convinced that there was money in it. Her judgment proved entirely correct, for the piece attracted large audiences for months together from all sections of theatre-goers. While Belgravia leaned back and laughed in the stalls, Brixton sat bolt upright in the pit and raised its honest hands in horror at the "goings on" of Smart Society on the stage. An eminent Nonconformist clergyman publicly

characterised the play as a "moral lesson," and a brightly written burlesque of it was incorporated into the musical comedy then running at the Gaiety.

The third production marking Mrs. Bellingham's essay in management met with less good fortune. It consisted of a "problem" play adapted from the French. The plot, however, had not stood the Channel crossing very well, and the experts who were called in to administer nourishment during the preliminary rehearsals rather overdid their efforts. When it was withdrawn at the end of a month, a witty writer in an Aberdeen paper remarked that "the most remarkable problem about this so-called 'problem' play was why it had ever been produced at all." The *mot* was serialised in all the provincial papers for several weeks, and was also introduced with great success into a Glasgow pantomime.

After the comparative failure of "Birds of a Feather," a succession of other pieces followed, the great majority of which proved exceedingly popular. Mrs. Bellingham's chief triumphs, however, were gained in costume-dramas. With regard to her dresses, indeed, she spared neither trouble nor money, and in this respect could always be depended upon to eclipse the most ambitious of her rivals. She made a point of appearing either in the most gorgeous costume imaginable, or else in one of such remarkable simplicity that (from the second row of stalls, at any rate) it appeared to amount to nothing at all. It did not matter in the least, though, for in whichever style she elected to burst upon her admirers, she was equally popular.

# V

THE day after he met Mrs. Bellingham, Adrian persuaded his friend Marchmont to come and dine with him. He had not much difficulty in doing so, for that gentleman took his journalistic duties somewhat lightly. When he called at his rooms with the invitation, he found him stretched out comfortably on the sofa, his eyes closed, and snoring loudly. He explained his attitude with the observation that he was engaged in "thinking out a paragraph for 'Tit-Bits,'" but to his visitor it appeared that he was principally engaged in being fast asleep.

Over the meal Adrian displayed such a curiosity respecting Mrs. Bellingham's career that at last he succeeded in rousing the other's suspicion. He put down his fork and regarded him inquiringly.

"My dear chap, why this pronounced thirst for information? Do you want to write a biography of the gifted lady, or have you suddenly developed a mad passion for her?"

"That's it," returned the other tranquilly. "I'm dying for love of her, and so I naturally want to know her family history. Tell me, is there a Mr. Bellingham anywhere?"

"I really don't know. I never heard of one, at any rate. It's quite probable, though, that there are a dozen—there generally are. Seriously, though, why are you so anxious to find out? I presume you've got beyond the stage of being enamoured of the heroines of picture postcards? The Bellingham's a beautiful creature, certainly, but she no more appeals to me than does the syren of a chocolate box."

"I daresay, but I rather want to know, all the same. The fact is, I'm thinking very strongly of going on the stage—or 'the boards,' as I understand talented dramatic critics like yourself call it—and making my debut at the Embankment."

Marchmont looked at his companion in wonder, and then burst out laughing.

"Good Lord, Merrick! You on the stage, indeed! What are you going to do there?"

"What do people generally do? Really, my dear fellow, you might be a little more encouraging without doing yourself much damage."

"Sorry, old chap, but it's a bit surprising that you should want to be a rotten actor."

Adrian smiled at his friend's tragic tone.

"I don't—that is—not a rotten one. Why should you think I did?"

"Oh, all play-acting gentlemen are much alike—all I've ever come across, at any rate. I never knew one with two ideas worth having. So long as they can get their pictures in the papers and their names on the 'buses, there's nothing else they care about."

"Still, there are worse people than actors."

"Certainly—there are leading men."

"Have another drink, you libellous ruffian, and try to be charitable. Tell me what your opinion is of actresses."

"I haven't got any."

"You're incorrigible," laughed Adrian. "I expect you've been crossed in love by one of the pretty creatures and the wound still rankles, or else all the managers have refused a play of yours."

"Quite a brain wave. As I suppose you've made up what you call your mind to go on the stage, I won't waste my breath trying to talk you over."

"Thanks. Tell me about Mrs. Bellingham instead. You literary chaps get hold of all the news."

"We know a bit," returned the other modestly, "even if

we don't always publish it. With regard to Grace Bellingham, though, I expect you're as wise as I am. The lady is lessee and manageress of the Embankment, and her new play, 'Whitehall,' is a howling frost. Every paper but those in which her synagogue—I mean syndicate—has shares gave it socks this morning, simply."

"Yes, the Press wasn't unduly enthusiastic. I only saw three or four notices, and none of them were what one could honestly call nice to the piece."

"Well, the show deserved it," returned Marchmont with conviction. "I've got a box full of better ones myself, and I expect you've got two or three knocking about somewhere."

"Now you mention it, I have got a masterpiece that's awaiting production. By the way, that's one of my reasons for taking advantage of this opportunity. If I go on the stage I'll find out a lot about technique."

"You'll find out a lot more about things you'd better remain ignorant of."

"And how long have you been running a theatre?" demanded Adrian, who was feeling just a little annoyed at the other's tone of superiority.

"Well, we won't argue about it," was the reply. "I shall be interested to hear your views in six months' time, though. They should be illuminative."

"They will."

That finished the discussion just then, for both felt that it might develop into something beyond gentle badinage. The journalist knew that the other's mind was definitely made up, and that it would be useless to try and induce him to alter it. Adrian and he had had many arguments together, and they had always ended in this fashion. It was their mutual power of recognizing one another's little weaknesses that had made them such firm friends. They parted an hour later on the understanding that they should meet again at the same time the next evening, when the appointment with Mrs. Bellingham would have taken place.

Adrian went to the interview, feeling a good deal more

excited than his tranquil appearance suggested. During the last thirty-six hours the adventure of the motor car had occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of almost everything else. The soft pressure of Mrs. Bellingham's hand at parting still lingered in his, and the tone of her low musical voice rang in his ears as though he had only just heard it. Since the memorable Tuesday night he had reconstructed the whole scene a hundred times.

In the bright sunshine streaming across the roadway and filling the long street with warmth and light, the outside of Mrs. Bellingham's flat looked specially charming. He paused for a moment on the opposite pavement to admire the trimly kept window-boxes, gay with a profusion of calceolarias and geraniums, and the striped awnings that shielded them. Once when the silk curtains moved slightly he fancied that his hostess must be watching for him from behind their shelter, and the idea gave him a little thrill of conscious pleasure. Despite Marchmont's uncomplimentary references to her, Grace Bellingham was certainly a very delightful person to call upon.

From the smart maid who opened the door he learned that Mrs. Bellingham was not in at the moment. She had been detained at the theatre, but had just telephoned to say that she would be back in a few minutes. Would Mr. Merrick be kind enough to wait?

The drawing-room into which he was shown struck him as delightful. It was almost square in shape, with low diamond-paned windows at either end, and seemed in some curious way to reflect its owner's personality. He glanced round it with interest, taking in its leading features in a first swift inspection, and then lingering on them one by one. There were flowers everywhere, either in great bowls of Sèvres china on the mantelpiece, or in copper vases resting on trays of hammered brass. A paper of some delicate blue tint joined a white wainscoting that covered the walls to a third of their height, and showed up in effective relief half a dozen graceful water-colours. Before the wide-mouthed, old-

fashioned fireplace was stretched a huge bearskin rug. Small tables, littered with dainty articles of cut glass and silver, filled the corners. In an alcove stood a baby grand, an open score lying on the chair beside it. Photographs in frames of all shapes and sizes looked down from the mantelpiece. Several, Adrian noted, were of Mrs. Bellingham herself in different costumes. One—an evening gown—showed her in a bodice cut so extremely low, that it seemed to be kept in place by nothing short of will-power. Still, it was a very charming portrait.

He was examining it more closely, when the door opened suddenly and a young man entered the room. Adrian looked at him in surprise, for his appearance was certainly a little remarkable. He was dressed in what was evidently an American tailor's idea of the latest English fashion, and wore an elaborately braided tail coat, a fancy waistcoat of such violent pattern that Adrian felt inclined to put cotton wool in his ears when he saw it, tight check trousers, and bright yellow boots with white spats. The other prominent details of his attire were comprised by a large bow tie, lemon kid gloves, and a handkerchief with a border of stars and stripes. A medallion of Mr. Roosevelt hung from his watch chain, and another was inserted in the lapel of his coat.

Crossing the room with a quick stride he seized Adrian's hand and grasped it effusively. Then he produced a large pocket-book and waved it before him.

"I guess I'm vurry glad to make your acquaintance, sir," he exclaimed breathlessly and in a strong nasal accent. "My name is Washington P. Claff—you'll easily remember it, because it rhymes with laff, and that's something you Britishers are always ready to do. I'm a journalist, and represent the 'Blade,' of Chicawgo, U.S.A. You may not think it, but I was raised in the States myself. Before I go any further, though, let me say how much I enjoyed your talented wife's performance on Tuesday evening. It was spry, sir—real spry!—and I have cabled my readers in Chicawgo City to this effect. The Amurican people think a

vurry great deal of your talented wife, sir, and hope to see her among them this fall."

"It's extremely kind of them," returned Adrian, completely mystified by the other's remarks, and wondering what on earth they referred to.

"Then I trust you will add your persuasions to those of the 'Blade,' sir, and that Noo York's next dramatic season will see her at one of our theatres there. I can count on your support, I hope?"

"Certainly, but—er—there's a trifling difficulty in the way."

Mr. Claff looked genuinely distressed.

"And what may that be?" he inquired anxiously.

"Well, to be candid with you, I haven't got a wife."

The smile of confident assurance faded from the other's face. He closed the pocket-book with a snap and sat down limply in the nearest chair.

"Not got a wife?" he echoed blankly. "Then aren't you Mr. Bellingham, the husband of the vurry talented actress that the 'Blade' has commissioned me to interview?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not."

"Great snakes! Wa-al, I guess I've made a bloomer as big as the 'Blade's' circulation."

"It seems like it, certainly," agreed Adrian. "My name is Merrick, and I've merely come to lunch with Mrs. Bellingham. I suppose you want to interview her for your paper?"

"That was the general idea."

"Well, here is the lady," returned Adrian, as the door opened again and Mrs. Bellingham rustled into the room, smiling and debonair.

"How do you do, Mr. Merrick?" she exclaimed brightly, for the moment not seeing his companion. "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting, but I was detained at the theatre by some bothering pressmen. Heaven only knows why they can't leave me alone. Perhaps they wanted to make amends, though, for the unkind notices they gave me of the piece. Half the critics nowadays are no better than hooligans!"

She turned to take off her gloves and saw the journalist looking at her ruefully. Without the slightest embarrassment she shook hands.

"My dear Mr. Claff, pray forgive me, but I didn't recognize you for the moment. You're so smart to-day! Our appointment was for two o'clock, wasn't it? Well, let's all go in to luncheon. You've made Mr. Merrick's acquaintance already, I suppose? That's right."

She led the way into the room which Adrian remembered so well, and they sat down to the meal. Mr. Claff, who had quite recovered his spirits, insisted, much to Adrian's annoyance, on telling his hostess the mistake he had made. Mrs. Bellingham, however, appeared rather amused by it than otherwise, and rallied her guest on his perturbed expression.

"Think of the catastrophe you've escaped, Mr. Merrick," she observed, "and cheer up." Then, as he did so, "Would it have been such a very terrible one?" she added in a tone that only he could hear.

"No," he returned boldly, "I'm sure it wouldn't."

She looked at him with eyes that shone approval.

"Thank you," she whispered. "You said that so nicely."

Then she turned her attention to her other guest, and listened with an assumption of extreme interest to a dissertation he was engaged upon at the moment respecting the American stage.

"What we want over there," he announced oracularly, "are drammers which the audience won't go to sleep over. At present all they seem to get is soothing-syrup."

"That's just the sort I'm in want of," observed Mrs. Bellingham.

Mr. Claff gazed at her with renewed interest.

"Wa-al, I guess that's real luck—the genooine article," he declared. "I've got a play I wrote myself that's calculated to keep even a Congressman awake. Say, Mrs. Bellingham, I'll send it along to you to read."

Mrs. Bellingham sighed tragically.

"Oh dear! I've got so many plays by me already. Won't yours keep?"

The enterprising author looked a little disappointed.

"Not in this weather, I'm afraid," he returned diffidently. "That is, not very long."

Mrs. Bellingham laughed.

"Oh, well, if it's like that perhaps you'd better send it at once. It will reach me all right if it's registered, won't it, Mr. Merrick?"

"I should suggest packing it in ice," observed Adrian drily. "The weather's a bit warm still, you know, and it doesn't do to take any risks."

Half an hour later Mr. Claff went off primed with notes concerning Mrs. Bellingham's opinions on things in general, which, he confidently asserted, would make the countless readers of the "Chicago Blade" certainly "sit up" when they saw them.

"He's a weird person, isn't he?" remarked Mrs. Bellingham as soon as the door had closed behind him. "I quite forgot he was coming here to-day, or I'd have asked you for to-morrow. I'm afraid you'll think it very rude of me to have talked so much about myself."

"Not at all. I liked it."

She looked at him and laughed.

"You're getting on, Mr. Merrick! Two nights ago there were moments when I thought you were shy. You looked as though you were afraid to say Bo to a goose—let alone to a chorus girl. I'm glad I was wrong, though. Now, come into the drawing-room and have a cigarette. I'll tell them to fetch our coffee there, too. By the way, which sort of cigarette do you prefer—Egyptian or Virginian?"

"Egyptian."

"I'm glad to hear it. So many otherwise nice men smoke Virginians nowadays."

Mrs. Bellingham seemed in no great hurry, thought Adrian, to broach the precise subject for the discussion of which he had nominally been invited to lunch. He leaned

back in the deep-seated arm-chair she had drawn up in intimate proximity to her own, and studied her closely. She was looking more lovely than ever, he decided, and her dress—of some soft clinging material that revealed every line and curve of her glorious figure—suited her to perfection. He wondered whose portrait was contained in the locket which hung suspended from the thin gold chain that encircled her slim neck. At the sight of it the first faint stirrings of what he would have indignantly denied as jealousy crept into his brain. He watched her shapely fingers playing with it, fascinated.

"Well," she said at last, breaking the silence, "let us get to business. As I told you, I can offer you an engagement in my company. It's nothing very grand, but it will be a start, at any rate. Later on—if all goes well—I may be able to give you something better. The part just now is a walk-on, with an understudy of one of the principals."

"That will do admirably. London can wait for my Hamlet, I'm sure."

"Then we'll call it a bargain. I want you to go down to the theatre on Friday morning and see my business manager, Mr. Antony. You can take him a note from me. He'll arrange the terms, and all that sort of thing, you know. I can't be expected to bother myself about money matters. As a rule, I always let Antony engage my company, too. It saves so much trouble. In your case, however, I've—well—I've made an exception."

"I'm exceedingly obliged to you," began Adrian gratefully, but Mrs. Bellingham cut his protestations short.

"Not at all. I consider I'm in your debt. If you have forgotten Berkeley Square, I haven't. Now here's the note I spoke of. Come to the matinée on Saturday afternoon and tell me what Mr. Antony says. I shan't rest till I know."

# VI

THE stage door of the Embankment Theatre was situated, as though ashamed of itself, in a dark passage near the gallery entrance. Adrian discovered its whereabouts with some difficulty. It was only, indeed, the presence of a little knot of scene shifters loafing about on the pavement outside that enabled him to recognize it at all.

As he stepped across the threshold, a man sitting behind an open window in a sort of office that faced the door glanced at him inquiringly.

"Who do you want?" he demanded in a brusque tone, apparently annoyed at being disturbed over his newspaper.

"I want Mr. Antony. Can I see him?"

"Not unless you can see through two flights of stairs and a ceiling."

"Would you kindly tell him, then—that is, as soon as you've finished that exciting paper—that I should be glad if he would spare me a few minutes."

The doorkeeper shook his head.

"I've got no one to send messages by," he growled.

"Dear me!" replied Adrian, turning to go. "That's a pity. I suppose I shall have to tell Mrs. Bellingham that the staff here is too overworked to deliver a letter for her to the manager."

At the mention of his employer's name the other became as nearly civil as he knew how to be.

"Here, hold on a minute, sir," he exclaimed. "I didn't know you'd brought a letter from Mrs. Bellingham."

"So I gathered from your manner. Here's the letter, though."

"Then I'll send it up by the call boy at once. We have to be careful, you know, sir," he added apologetically, "because so many people come down here and pretend they've got appointments with the guv'nor."

"I'm sure you're the soul of caution," responded Adrian politely. Then he turned to examine a framed notice, headed "Rules and Regulations of the Embankment Theatre," that hung on the wall behind him, while the doorkeeper sent the note off by a diminutive youth who was playing marbles in the passage.

Mrs. Bellingham's letter of introduction was obviously an Open Sesame to the jealously guarded portals of the manager's office, for in less than five minutes the messenger reappeared and announced with evident surprise that its bearer would be seen at once. Piloted by the youth, Adrian made his way along a whitewashed corridor and up a flight of stone steps. At the top he stood aside to let a girl pass him. Her face seemed familiar, but for the moment he could not quite determine where he had seen it.

"Who was that?" he demanded of his guide, as she turned the corner and disappeared.

"Miss Constance Assheton, sir. She's playing in the piece."

He remembered the name at once. It was that of the girl whose performance had impressed him so favourably on the first night. She looked even prettier, he thought, this morning. Her style, of course, was different from Mrs. Bellingham's, but he was not sure that he did not prefer it.

At the doorway, marked "Office—Private," the call boy stopped and rapped sharply on the panel. Then, as a querulous voice called out "Come in!" he ushered Adrian into the room and withdrew.

The office in which Adrian found himself was a large and comfortably furnished one. At intervals round the walls hung a variety of framed cast-lists, and against a bookcase was stacked a pile of programmes. A few photographs, which he recognized as being those of theatrical celebrities,

stood on an oak cabinet beside a telephone instrument. Seated at a big desk in the centre of the room, so covered with letters and papers that many of them overflowed on to the floor, was a thin saturnine man, to whose appearance the new-comer took an instinctive dislike. He seemed about forty years of age and was smartly dressed, although he displayed rather more jewellery than good taste made permissible. Underneath a pair of bushy brows little beady eyes peered out furtively, and a rather cruel-looking jaw gave an unpleasant expression to the lower part of his face. He nodded curtly when his visitor entered, and continued reading a letter. Not being invited to sit down, Adrian remained standing until it should please Mr. Antony to attend to him.

Mrs. Bellingham's business manager had a somewhat unpleasant reputation in the theatrical world, for his nature was anything but conciliatory. Of German-Jewish extraction, his name had originally been Anthony. When he came to London, however, about fifteen years earlier, it was altered to Antony, the dropped "h" being due, so his enemies asserted, to a desire to appear thoroughly English. His disposition was tyrannical in the extreme, and he was never happier than when bullying his subordinates. Most of the people under him either hated or feared him, and many did both. This, however, did not disturb him in the least, for he regarded it as a tribute to his capacity. He had a supreme contempt for actors, and an even greater one for actresses, while his opinion of the playgoing public was, if anything, still more uncomplimentary. With Mrs. Bellingham, however, he got on admirably, for he was undoubtedly the shrewdest business manager in London. One of his qualities which specially appealed to her was that he could always secure a cast on lower terms than any one else. While quite willing to spend money lavishly on herself, she was strongly disinclined to do so on other people. James Antony catered to this trait with marked success, and never objected when his employer explained to disappointed

members of her company that the smallness of her salary-list was entirely due to himself.

"You must ask my manager for a rise," she would say with a charming smile. "I leave these matters entirely to him."

Having kept his visitor waiting for what he considered a sufficiently long period to impress him with a sense of his importance, he put the letter of introduction down and glanced towards him. Struck by something in Adrian's appearance, he suddenly altered his demeanour.

"You're Mr. Merrick, I suppose?" he began. "Well, Mrs. Bellingham tells me I'm to find you an opening here. I'm sure I don't know why, but she seems to think that there aren't enough people in the company already."

"Mrs. Bellingham was kind enough to say that I might be an understudy," observed Adrian, who was beginning to think that the manager was the most ill-bred person he had ever encountered. "Is there a vacancy in that direction?"

"Well, there does happen to be one," was the grudging response, "but I've practically filled it up."

"Then I'll tell her so," replied Adrian stiffly, as he crossed to the door. He was getting rather tired of Mr. Antony, and had not the slightest intention of asking a favour of him.

The manager looked up curiously. His visitor's attitude was a new one, and he did not quite understand it. He was used to being fawned upon, and this seemed to be the last thing that could be expected of this remarkable young man. However, he could be taught better later on, no doubt.

"Hold on a moment," he returned. "I said 'practically.' In the theatrical world we don't settle things offhand. As Mrs. Bellingham recommends you, I must, of course, meet her wishes. The vacancy I referred to is one that she mentions in her letter. It's an understudy for the part of Captain Westcott. I dare say you remember it if you saw the piece the other night?"

"Certainly. It's played by a Mr. Godfrey Deane."

"Yes, that's the man. Well, you'll have to go on for him if required at any time, so you must study the lines and the business. You'll also have to make yourself useful as one of the courtiers in the second act. By the way, have you got any experience?"

"None at all."

"I'm glad to hear it. There'll be all the less for you to unlearn. Most of the people Mrs. Bellingham wants pitchforked into her plays after the run has started are talented amateurs. It takes six months at least to drill 'em into shape, and by that time the piece is probably off."

Adrian was beginning to feel that the interview had been sufficiently prolonged.

"I'm much obliged to you," he said. "Mrs. Bellingham has asked me to come in and see her to-morrow afternoon during the matinée and tell her what has been settled."

"One moment, Mr. Merrick. There's something else to discuss first. What's your idea of a suitable salary?"

This was the last thing that Adrian had thought of. It had never occurred to him that he would be consulted on the subject at all.

"Oh, I'd better leave that to you," he returned after a moment's pause.

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I can't see my way to offer you more than a guinea a week."

Adrian's face fell.

"That's not very much."

"You can't buy a motor with it, certainly. Still, I could get my pick of experienced actors—people capable of small parts—for that money. You must remember, too, that you're only on among the crowd, and that the understudy isn't likely to come to anything. It wouldn't be fair on the others if you were paid more than the market price. Then there's another point to think of—you're not being charged a premium."

Adrian pricked up his ears at the term. Truly, he was learning a lot about theatrical engagements this morning.

"A premium?" he echoed.

"Yes, certainly. Why on earth shouldn't you pay a premium? I had to do so—indirectly, at any rate. If you went into any other line of business you'd have to pay handsomely for being taught your work. And quite right, too. I don't know why people should think that they're entitled to come on the stage without the slightest experience and draw a salary while they're learning the rudiments of acting. I consider that the instruction you'll get here is well worth paying for. Certainly, no one yet ever made his or her debut in Mrs. Bellingham's company without having to put down a premium. However, she says you're not to do so, and there's an end of it."

This was quite a new view of the case to Adrian, and he turned it over in his mind reflectively. While agreeing with the manager's principles in the main, he thought it a pity that politeness had not been included in the course of instruction which that individual himself had received. He kept this opinion, however, to himself.

"Many thanks," he said, picking up his hat and gloves. "I'll tell Mrs. Bellingham I've seen you."

The other's thin lips broke into something like a smile.

"You seem to be in a remarkable hurry to go. Most of the people who come here want to stop in the office all day. In fact, I have great difficulty in getting rid of them. If you'll wait a couple of minutes I'll send for Mr. Deane. He's the man you're to understudy, and will tell you everything about the part. I believe he's still in the theatre. On Monday you can come and report yourself to Mr. Keene, the stage manager."

Crossing to the telephone, he set the indicator to the division marked "stage" and delivered a peremptory message to the doorkeeper. It was answered almost immediately by the entrance of a pleasant-looking young man of about Adrian's own age. He looked at the manager inquiringly.

"Did you want to see me, Mr. Antony?"

"Yes. This is Mr. Adrian Merrick. He joins the company on Monday as your understudy. Put him up to the way of doing things, and teach him his work generally. I'm busy now. Good day."

Then, with a curt nod towards both to intimate that the interview was over, he resumed his examination of the papers before him.

"Well, what do you think of our business manager?" inquired Godfrey Deane as they went downstairs together. "Nice genial sort of hooligan to be under, isn't he?"

"I've met more affable individuals, certainly," returned Adrian guardedly. "I suppose he was absent, though, when politeness was being served out."

"Come down to my dressing-room," laughed the other, "and let's have a talk."

He walked along a passage and opened a door at the end. The room into which he led the way was carpetless and the walls were unpapered, while it was also almost entirely destitute of furniture. A narrow strip of looking-glass, with wire-guarded gas brackets above it, ran the entire length of one of the walls. Immediately underneath projected a broad low shelf, covered by a strip of towelling that looked as though it had been subjected to a good deal of usage. A cigar box, half full of sticks of grease-paint, and a chipped saucer containing rouge stood beside a washing basin. On the opposite wall, more or less protected by a sheet, some stage costumes hung from a row of pegs. The only daylight admitted came through a small window, high up near the ceiling. Adrian thought of an article he had lately read dilating upon the luxuriously appointed dressing-rooms that characterised all West End theatres, and wondered if the writer had ever seen this one. His companion seemed to divine what he was thinking of. He lit a cigarette and looked at him with a smile of amusement.

"Dainty little boudoir, isn't it? However, the worthy

Antony would probably tell you that it's quite good enough for play-actors. So you're going to join us?" he added.

"That's the idea," observed Adrian. "I've just fixed it up with that charming person we left two minutes ago. By the way, why does Mrs. Bellingham employ him?"

Deane blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully into the air.

"Because he's just about the smartest business manager in London. Oh, I'm not fond of James Antony, but I must admit he knows his work. If it hadn't been for him Mrs. Bellingham would have found herself in the bankruptcy court long ago. Her syndicate is quite right in putting him in to run the show."

Adrian digested the information. It gave him a sidelight on Mrs. Bellingham's character that was not without its value.

"Tell me something about the company," he said. "I saw the piece on the first night, but, with the exception of yourself, I scarcely remember any one."

"Well, the leading lady you know personally, I believe. In fact, she told me you were coming to us. After her, Aubrey Hood is the most important individual—in his own estimation, at any rate. He has far and away the best part, and he's not half bad in it. All the same, though, he's rather a bounder—but that you'll find out for yourself. The fact is, he's one of those posturing humbugs that fancies every girl's in love with him, and the devil of it is most of them are. Then there's Randall Holmes—our tragedian, by the way, and a chap with a touch of the same complaint—Tommy Bedford, the comedian—a drunken little rascal, but extremely good in his line of business—and my noble self. That about exhausts the principals."

"I see. And what about the ladies?"

"Oh, they're no great shakes. Mrs. Bellingham always takes jolly good care to see that no one clashes with herself. She's fairly successful, too, this time. The pick of the basket is Stella Mortimer—she's married to Keene, the stage manager. Hilda Fawcett—Holmes' wife—is a pleasant enough young woman so long as you stroke her the right

way, and so is Mabel Warren. I don't think there's any one else of importance."

Adrian detected what he thought a notable omission in the catalogue.

"There was a girl who struck me as being rather good when I saw the piece the other night," he remarked diffidently. "I think the name was Miss Assheton."

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten Connie Assheton. You're right, she's quite good in the part, and a very nice girl too. I don't think Mrs. Bellingham's too fond of her, though, and Antony and she can't stand one another at all."

"Why?" demanded Adrian, conscious that his interest had suddenly increased at the mention of Miss Assheton's name.

"Well, as regards Mrs. Bellingham, I fancy it's because she got some rather good notices."

"Oh, rot! You'll be telling me next that Mrs. Bellingham is jealous!"

"I shouldn't be altogether surprised if I did," was the tranquil response. "Then, as for Miss Assheton's dislike of the ingratiating Antony—well, I think that's not unnatural, either. Now, look here," he went on, "it sounds a rash statement to make, perhaps, but I've got an idea. It's just one o'clock. I want to go round to the Stage Club to lunch, and I'll be very glad if you'll come with me. Some of our distinguished company are bound to be there, and it will be a good opportunity for you to meet them."

"Thanks, very much," returned Adrian. "I'll be delighted."

# VII

THE Stage Club occupied a set of rooms in a side street off the Charing Cross Road. It catered principally for young actors and those individuals connected with the theatrical world who had not yet attained sufficient eminence therein to join the Garrick or any of the better known establishments. The subscription was moderate and the qualifications for membership elastic. A considerable proportion of those belonging to it were generally engaged in touring, and these made the premises their headquarters whenever they happened to be in town. A few of the less important managers, together with a sprinkling of dramatists, music-hall comedians, critics, and journalists, were also included in the list of members. A great feature of the club was made of the Saturday night suppers, at which distinguished strangers were entertained, when, as Adrian's host remarked, one never quite knew beforehand whether the guest of the evening would be a distinguished actor or a distinguished acrobat.

The smoking-room into which his friend ushered him seemed fairly full when they entered. It was a comfortable enough room, furnished in the usual manner with an abundance of arm-chairs and little tables. A variety of theatrical papers were scattered about on the latter, and a row of framed caricatures of popular actors ran round the walls above a panelling of dark oak. In an alcove at one end was a bar which, judging from the number of men standing beside it and the constant clinking of glasses, seemed to be doing a brisk business. Two or three of those nearest the

door nodded to Deane as he came in, and one or two others spoke to him. He returned their salutations briefly, and led the way to a comparatively unoccupied corner.

"It's nothing very grand," he observed apologetically, "but it's not a bad little crib, all the same."

Adrian looked round the room with interest. He had never been in a theatrical club before, and this one was very different from his expectations. The members struck him as being distinctly curious. None of them resembled in the least any other types that he had hitherto encountered. To a certain degree they were all very much alike, every one being clean shaven, with sallow cheeks that told of constant living in a heated atmosphere, and the majority wearing their hair a good deal longer than was customary among people not connected with the stage. Their clothes, too, in several cases, had something distinctive about their cut and pattern. They suggested that their owners were trying to derive some advertisement from them. He hoped that when he himself became a full-fledged actor it would not be necessary for him to patronize the same tailors. Although he was prepared to make certain sacrifices, there were others that he was resolved to hold out against.

"Some of these chaps are rather weird," remarked his companion. "Still, they're interesting enough, all the same."

A big stout man, with a very low turned-down collar that exposed several inches of a flabby neck, and wearing an evening waistcoat in combination with a frock coat, attracted Adrian's attention. He was talking in a loud tone, and, from the deference paid him, seemed to be a person of importance.

"Who is the—er—somewhat *décolleté* gentleman?" he inquired.

Godfrey Deane laughed at the description.

"Oh, that's Ballard Browne. He writes violent melodramas for provincial audiences, and makes about three thousand a year out of them. They're tremendously popular

—blood trickling down to the footlights and thrills in every line. I'll introduce you presently, as he's a very useful person to know. He's a vulgar dog, of course, and with more aspirations than aspirates, but extremely good-hearted, however."

As he spoke, the dramatist came across the room and planted his big frame in a chair next to Adrian's. He sat down pantingly and mopped his forehead with a crimson silk handkerchief.

"'Ullo, Deane!" he exclaimed genially, waving a fat hand on which glittered a diamond ring. "'Ow does this weather suit you?"

"It's pretty warm, certainly."

"Phew! You wouldn't call it 'ot, then?"

"No, I don't think I should do that," returned the other with a perfectly grave face. "This is my friend, Mr. Adrian Merrick."

"Pleased to meet you, dear boy. In the profesh?"

"Mr. Merrick has just joined Mrs. Bellingham's crowd," replied Deane, interpreting.

The new-comer regarded Adrian pityingly.

"Then I'm sorry for you. If 'Whitehall' isn't a frost, I don't know anything about it. You may take it from me, dear boy, melodrammer's the only thing that pays!"

"I shall hope to play in one of your pieces some day, Mr. Browne," observed Adrian, thinking it as well to be polite.

"Well, we'll see what can be done," returned the author good-humouredly. "If you're not starring in ''Amlet' you can come and see me in the autumn. I might be sending out a company then."

"Thanks. I shall be charmed."

A seedy-looking man sitting at an adjoining table, with a bottle of beer before him, glanced up eagerly as the dramatist spoke.

"That's the one you promised your humble a shop in, ain't it?" he called out.

"Quite right."

"Well, I hope you've got a good part for me this time?"

"Yes, my clever young friend, a magnificent one."

"Glad to hear it. Any chance of my pleasing the audience?"

Mr. Browne winked in Adrian's direction.

"I should rather think so," he replied. "Why, you die in the first act." Then he lit a cigar with a large band on it and strolled across the room to the bar.

The stranger glared after him angrily, and moved to the seat just vacated.

"That's just like that old beast Browne," he muttered. "These swines of authors haven't any idea how to treat a gentleman! What's your opinion of him, Deane?"

"Oh, I've always found him civil enough," was the curt reply. "By the way, I don't think you know my friend? Mr. Merrick, this is Mr. Stuart Syme."

The individual thus introduced placed a hand familiarly on Adrian's shoulder.

"Pleased to meet you, dear boy," he observed with effusive geniality. "I hear you're going on at the Embankment. Wish you joy of it, I'm sure. Mrs. Bellingham's a bit of a coughdrop; and as for that Hebrew slave-driver, Antony, who calls himself a manager—well, he oughtn't to be allowed in a decent theatre at all. I give you my word, dear boy, when I asked him for a part the other day he told me I could have a walk on. 'Thank you for nothing,' I said. 'I could act you off the stage any day in the week, and chance it.' He got shirty then—these bounders never know how to be civil, it strikes me—and told the doorkeeper I wasn't to be admitted if I called again."

Adrian looked at the speaker with mingled amusement and disgust. He was about thirty-five years of age, and had a coarse, dissipated face that made him anything but attractive. It was also clear that he paid very little attention to his personal appearance, for he had two days' growth of stubbly beard on his chin, and his collar was frayed and

dirty. He looked, too, as though he habitually slept in his clothes, and these were distinctly in need of repair. Some ingenuity, however, had been displayed in concealing their more obvious deficiencies. Thus, he wore a shirt which evidently took to pieces, for, on a foundation of flannel, a superstructure of rather dingy linen was clearly visible, and when he projected an arm to light a cigarette a cuff became detached and dropped on to the floor. Adrian could not help smiling at the extremely nonchalant manner in which he readjusted it.

"Well, I'm off," he remarked, as soon as he had succeeded in obtaining a light. "I've got to go round to see a man about the new piece they're putting on at the Carlton."

"Which do you mean," inquired Deane, "the club or the pub?"

"Neither, you humorist. I mean the theatre, of course. By the way, you haven't got such a thing as a sovereign about you, I suppose?"

"I haven't."

"Very well," returned Mr. Syme with assumed gaiety, "then I won't borrow it. Ta-ta! Good-bye, Mr. Merrick. See you again some day, dear boy."

Adrian turned to his companion as the other sauntered off.

"I wish that low ruffian wouldn't call me 'dear boy,'" he remarked.

"Oh, you'll have to get used to that," laughed Deane. "It's a theatrical custom, but it doesn't mean anything. Why, they'll take to calling you by your Christian name—the women, too—before they've known you five minutes."

Adrian shrugged his shoulders. The point did not seem worth discussing.

"Who are all these other clever people?"

Godfrey Deane glanced carelessly round the room. Suddenly his eyes lighted up.

"Do you see those two men just coming in?" he said in a low tone. "They both belong to the company. The one wearing an overcoat is Aubrey Hood. He plays lead with

us. The other is Felix Keene, our stage manager. They'll come across to us directly."

Adrian felt his interest aroused by the names, and regarded their owners closely. Aubrey Hood's appearance provoked a feeling of distinct antipathy in him, for which it was not easy to assign any adequate reason. He was a tall, handsome man, with remarkably well-cut features, but there was a sinister expression in his greenish-grey eyes, and an unpleasant smile playing about the corners of his thin-lipped mouth that made Adrian recoil instinctively. He was extremely well dressed, however, and certainly looked a gentleman. His companion presented a distinct contrast, being a short alert individual, well on towards middle age, with a rather florid complexion and inclined to stoutness. He seemed a good-humoured sort of person, and was laughing and talking at a great rate. The conversation between them, however, appeared to be rather one-sided, for the leading man was regarding him with an air of superior boredom. Presently his roving glance caught sight of Deane, and the next moment they both came up to him.

Aubrey Hood shook hands cordially enough when Adrian was introduced, and congratulated him on joining the company.

"It's not half a bad crowd," he observed judicially, "and Keene here keeps us all in order."

"I've my hands pretty full sometimes, I assure you, Mr. Merrick," laughed the stage manager. "Our dashing friend Master Aubrey is rather a dangerous character to have in a theatre."

"Any more fair ladies dying for love of you?" inquired Deane.

"Very probably," was the reply, delivered in such a nonchalant tone that Adrian felt the antipathy which had almost died away suddenly reassert itself. He turned to the stage manager.

"I saw Mr. Antony this morning," he remarked, "and he told me to report myself to you."

"That's all right. I've had a word with him, too. Come down to the theatre at eleven on Monday morning. I'm posting a call to-night. There's to be a full rehearsal."

"What on earth for?" inquired Hood.

"Ask me another, dear boy. It appears, though, that the distinguished author has suddenly grown modest. At any rate, he isn't quite satisfied with the play. Antony tells me that he has persuaded Mrs. Bellingham to let him make some alterations in it, and these will necessitate a run through."

"I fancy I know the sort of alterations Harrison Elliott is likely to make," observed Deane reflectively. "He'll want to change the first three acts for entirely fresh ones and re-write the fourth!"

"And by the time he's finished messing about with the script 'Whitehall' will be as dead as a last year's pantomime," declared Hood. "I was playing in another of his alleged dramas once, and every day he came down to the theatre with a brilliant inspiration for improving the piece. At the end of a month old Bill Blake, who was putting up the money for the show, got so damned sick of him and his fads that he decided that the best way of improving the piece would be to take it off altogether. He wasn't far wrong, either. Hullo!" he added, as a small man in a large check suit, and with merry twinkling eyes, left the bar and came rather unsteadily towards his corner of the room, "here's our clever comedian, Tommy Bedford."

"Boozed as usual, too," observed Keene in a tone of disgust. "The very first time he turns up at the theatre in that condition I'll give him his notice."

All unconscious of the unfavourable comments he was exciting, the comedian pursued his erratic course between the different tables, and finally established himself in a vacant chair beside Adrian. He beamed upon the trio with great good humour, and then called for a whisky and soda.

"Morning, dear boys," he exclaimed genially, trying to fix each in turn with a somewhat fishy eye. "I've jush been

signing—hic—highly important contract with Mrs. B—B—Bell—"

"Bellingham," suggested Deane.

"All ri', you confounded elocutionist! That'sh what I said, wasn't it?"

"I dare say," returned Keene, eyeing him with evident disfavour, "but it didn't sound like it. Don't forget to turn up for the run through on Monday morning."

Bedford made no answer. He appeared absorbed in studying his boots.

"I hope I'm not keeping you awake," continued the other. Then he took out his watch and nodded significantly to Hood.

"Aubrey and I must tear ourselves away just now, I'm afraid. Take care of yourself, Tommy. Good-bye, you two. We shall meet again on Monday, Mr. Merrick."

Adrian and Deane exchanged glances of amusement and went off to luncheon, the comedian declining an invitation to join them on the plea that eating between drinks did not agree with him. They left him in the middle of a long story which he was reciting to no one in particular.

"That's the worst of fellows in our line of business," remarked Deane. "They're almost certain to go on the booze sooner or later. Tommy Bedford used to be quite a decent little chap. He is now, so long as he's not drunk."

"Is he ever in that condition when he's playing?"

"Oh no. The moment he gets on the boards he's all right. I expect he knows that Keene and Antony are only waiting for a chance to catch him screwed during business hours. He'd lose his job at once then, poor chap."

"I suppose there is more temptation to liquor up on the stage than elsewhere?" observed Adrian reflectively.

"I dare say. Certainly, lots of even the best men are a bit inclined that way. It's a mug's game, though, and those who go in for it are bound to come to grief. You remember Jimmy Watson, don't you?"

"The fellow who was so good in Shakespeare? He used to be leading man at the Regency, I believe."

"That's the chap. And very good he was, too."

"Well, what's happened to him now? I thought he was dead."

"It would be a jolly sight better for him if he were. He's busking at Margate now."

"Busking?"

"Yes—playing on the sands. He spouts Hamlet and Othello, and sends a hat round for coppers. It's a bit of a come-down for a London favourite, and a man who used to draw his fifty pounds a week regularly."

On the way back to his rooms that afternoon, Adrian went round to Hill Street to see Marchmont. He found him busy, putting the finishing touches to a magazine article. It was thrown aside, however, when his visitor entered.

"Hullo, my bold play-actor!" he exclaimed. "Still on the stage?"

"Yes, I've not retired yet. I'm thinking of doing so when you become editor of the 'Times.'"

Marchmont grinned appreciatively.

"Then you'll stop where you are for a bit, old chap."

"Does that mean that you're still getting your deathless articles bunged back to you?"

"No, I get a very few returned now."

Adrian felt pleased at the announcement. It argued prosperity for his friend.

"That's good news. How do you manage it?"

"Well, I don't put my name and address on them. But tell me the news about yourself. When do you make your debut?"

"On Monday evening, I believe. I'm cast for the important rôle of one of the 'shouts off' in the ball-room scene."

"I'll be there to support you, my boy. I wouldn't miss it for anything. I suppose you'll be promoted to thrilling the audience with the information that 'the carriage waits, my lord,' in a week or two, and we'll be seeing your photograph all over the 'Sketch.'"

Adrian laughed good-humouredly.

"Not quite so soon as that, I'm afraid. Still, all in good time."

"Well, when you do," observed the other, "I'll come and interview you for the 'Herald's' series of 'Footlight Favourites.' I did Mrs. Bellingham for it a month ago. My word, you should have seen the way she mauled about the proof!"

"In what way?"

"Every way. There's no mock modesty about that lady, I can assure you. I had to re-write the whole interview three times before she'd pass it as being fit to print."

"Not more? Your style must be improving."

Marchmont threw a book at his visitor's head by way of answer.

"When you're a more famous play-actor than you are just now, my budding Beerbohm, you'll treat the Press with suitable respect, I hope. By the way, how many London managers are fighting for you already?"

"Only two at present. One is Mrs. Bellingham—whose offer I have accepted—and the other is a Mr. Ballard Browne. He's a man I met at luncheon to-day, and I understand he writes popular melodramas for the masses."

"There's nothing like a good melodrama—except a bad one—for attracting an audience," declared the other. "I don't know how it is, but there are always plenty of people who like going to a theatre and paying money to see a make-believe motor-car hauled across the stage by an obvious rope, when they can go into the street and see the real thing properly done without any charge at all. I shall love to see you putting your hand on your heart and shouting heroics, with the limelight streaming round you!"

# VIII

ON the day of the matinée Adrian lunched at a restaurant in the Strand near the theatre. He had asked Marchmont to accompany him, but the invitation had been declined on the ground that a second visit to "Whitehall" would prove fatal to his constitution.

"I'll come and see the show again when you're barnstorming," he wrote. "Until then it has no further interest for me."

On the whole, Adrian was not sorry at the decision. Although he did not take his friend's uncomplimentary views seriously, they acted, nevertheless, rather as a wet blanket. He wanted all the encouragement possible, and Marchmont seemed strongly adverse to supplying any.

As he lingered over his coffee, wondering why Marchmont —whose opinions, as a rule, were broadminded enough— should prove so prejudicial in this particular instance, a shadow fell across the table where he was sitting. Looking up, he saw Aubrey Hood, with an extremely pretty girl beside him. He recognized her immediately as Miss Assheton. They were apparently on the point of leaving.

"Good day, Mr. Merrick," said Hood. "We were at the other end of the room when you came in. I don't think you know Miss Assheton?"

The girl smiled—a particularly charming smile, thought Adrian—and held out her hand frankly.

"How do you do?" she said. "I think I saw you in the theatre yesterday morning when you were on your way up to the office. I've been hearing all about you from Aubrey."

Adrian winced a little. He was not yet inured to theatri-

cal customs, and the ready use of the Christian name rather jarred. He succeeded, however, in concealing the fact.

"Not *all*, I hope."

"Won't it bear telling, then?" she inquired demurely.

"I was very discreet, my dear fellow, I assure you," declared Hood, with a laugh that grated on its recipient.

"I'm sure you were," returned Adrian somewhat shortly. Miss Assheton's badinage was one thing, but he objected to it when it came from the man beside her. The actor's personality offended him. He looked so thoroughly self-satisfied, and the semi-proprietary interest with which he regarded his companion was annoying. Adrian wondered what so nice a girl could see in such a person. Of course, he was extremely good-looking, but he was an ill-bred individual all the same.

Aubrey Hood, however, appeared serenely unconscious of having impressed him in any but a favourable fashion. He stood laughing and chatting for a few minutes, and then declared that it was time to go.

"We have to take the curtain up, you know—that is, start the piece," he explained.

"I hate matinées," exclaimed Miss Assheton. "Giving two shows in one day quite tires me out. My dressing-room is on the top floor, and, as I have four changes to make, it means running up and down something like twelve hundred steps by the time the second performance is over. You've no idea how exhausting this is, Mr. Merrick, till you try it."

"I'll take your word for it," replied Adrian. "I'm in no hurry to make the experiment."

"As you're bound for the same place as ourselves, you might as well come down with us," said Hood, "and we'll all go on together."

Adrian assented gladly. He did not particularly want to cultivate the leading man, but Constance Assheton certainly attracted him. There was nothing theatrical about her, and she had none of the other's ridiculous affectation. Indeed, she looked so unlike an actress that he almost found himself

wondering as he glanced at her if she really was connected with the stage. So far as Aubrey Hood, on the other hand, was concerned, it was impossible to mistake him for anything but an actor. He even walked in a theatrical fashion, while he seemed to dispense an atmosphere of the footlights with every word he uttered. His one subject of conversation was apparently restricted to the different parts he had played, and on these he dilated at such length that neither of his companions could scarcely get in a word. At last Miss Assheton, noting the rather bored expression on Adrian's face, asserted herself.

"Don't let's talk so much shop," she exclaimed, "or Mr. Merrick will think we can't discuss anything else."

Aubrey Hood instantly became sulky and, stopping short in the middle of a remark, lapsed into moody silence. When he saw the troubled look that promptly crept into the other's eyes, Adrian felt sorry that she had interfered. Fortunately, they reached the theatre a moment later, and the sight of a long line of people waiting outside the pit gave them all something fresh to think of. The presence of the crowd seemed to act as a tonic on Hood, and—as a group of girls recognized him and whispered meaningly to one another—he grew quite cheerful again.

"The conceited ape only wanted an audience," reflected Adrian in disgust as they parted at the stage door.

Going round to the front of the house he came upon Antony standing in the foyer. Rather to his surprise he found the manager obviously inclined to be cordial, for he shook hands effusively and asked him where he would like to sit.

"You'd better have an end stall," he said, after a brief colloquy with the box-office clerk, "as you will then be able to get in and out easily. Mrs. Bellingham wants you to go round and see her after the first interval."

"Thanks," replied Adrian, taking the ticket which the other signed. "I'll be glad to do so." The manager's sudden civility was a new trait. He wondered what it meant.

The matinée audience was larger than he had expected, and seemed to indicate that the piece was not such a failure after all. The great majority of those present were women. Instinctively he put down a good many of them as actresses. There was something about their clothes—if not their complexions—that seemed to proclaim the stage unmistakably. He wondered why this should be the case, and sincerely hoped that, so far as he himself was concerned, he would never come to resemble the typical actor. There were a couple of the class sitting just in front of him. With their long hair, soft hats, and loose-flowing neckties they struck him as looking unpleasantly effeminate. From their clearly audible conversation they were evidently trying to impress him with a sense of their importance.

"I assure you, dear old boy," one of them remarked loudly, "Grace Bellingham herself positively begged me to play lead for her this season. Of course I refused, though, as I could see that the piece wouldn't last a month."

"It beats me how that affected bounder, Aubrey Hood, gets the parts he does," went on the other. "I'm sure I should be ever so much better in them, Percy. I'll tell you what Tree said to me the other day when——"

Then the orchestra burst into a noisy overture and the rest of the interesting disclosure was lost, much to the evident annoyance of two young women in large picture hats who had turned round to listen.

In comparison with the initial performance this one seemed a great improvement, and the nervousness which had marked certain members of the company on the opening night was now absent. Every one had quite settled down into his or her part, and before long Adrian found himself following the piece with an interest he had not anticipated. The plot no longer dragged in the old irritating fashion, but moved with a briskness that was exhilarating to see. As a play it was nothing very remarkable, of course, but he felt that the strictures passed upon it by the critics generally were not altogether deserved. At any rate, infinitely worse

dramas had before now blossomed into successes. When the contemplated alterations to which the stage manager had alluded should have been carried out it ought, he decided, to enjoy a fairly prosperous run.

On the fall of the curtain at the end of the first act one of the attendants came up to him.

"Please, sir, Mrs. Bellingham says will you come round and see her in her dressing-room."

Conscious that he had suddenly become an object of great interest in the eyes of the two young men in front of him, who both turned in their seats to stare hard at him, Adrian rose and followed his guide. The attendant led him through an iron pass door on a level with the stalls exit, and the next moment he found himself standing on the stage. An army of scene shifters was at work there, and he paused to observe the manner in which, under their vigorous attacks, great walls of canvas melted swiftly away to give place to an entirely fresh arrangement. The work was carried out so deftly that it was almost like watching a conjuring trick. At a word from the master carpenter, who apparently reigned supreme, the whole of the background rose suddenly into the air and remained suspended from a beam overhead, while a huge cloth depicting a street was let down in front of it. A miniature wood sprang up as though by magic on a spot where a moment ago had stood a garden terrace, and a row of solid-looking houses fell to pieces before his eyes like a pack of cards. Perched high up on a narrow platform at the side of the proscenium an electrician was trying various lighting effects, flooding the stage with broad beams of colour—now red, now blue, and now blinding white. A calcium apparatus hissed and spluttered in the wings, and half a dozen linen-coated men were busily engaged in fixing a number of wire-cased lamps behind a strip of canvas. Through the heavy curtain shutting off the auditorium came at intervals the muffled sounds of the orchestra.

"Quick work," remarked Keene, as he moved away from the switch-board. "We've only seven minutes to set this

scene in. Lord, I c
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doorway, while across the door itself was a magnificent piece of Rose du Barri tapestry. From the delicately moulded ceiling hung a cluster of softly shaded electric lights, and others in wrought iron fittings projected from each corner. On an inlaid table was set out a tea tray with a spirit lamp and copper kettle. Behind an embossed leather screen at the far end peeped the edge of a long looking-glass.

As her visitor entered, Mrs. Bellingham rose from a sort of divan, on which she was reclining in an attitude of extreme languor, and extended a hand. Seen at such close quarters with all her make-up on, she was not so attractive, thought Adrian, as she was from a little distance. Her thickly powdered face, pencilled eyebrows, and painted lips, almost roused a feeling of repulsion in him. She seemed so artificial, where previously she had been so natural. Before the radiant smile with which she greeted him, however, he capitulated utterly.

"So nice of you to come, Mr. Merrick," she said in a low, half-caressing voice that he found quite irresistible. "I've

been wanting to have a talk with you ever so much. Will it bore you to stop for twenty minutes? I don't go on again until then."

Adrian felt that he was blushing furiously. As a general rule nothing ever disturbed his tranquillity. But Mrs. Bellingham was undoubtedly very beautiful, and the suggestion in her tone made him catch at his breath.

"I shall be charmed," he stammered.

"Then please look it," she laughed. "I'm going to give you some tea directly. You may smoke, too, if you like. Oh, by the way, I haven't introduced you. This is Mr. Raphael Montagu, my Press agent—I mean, my secretary."

Adrian turned round and saw a young man he had not hitherto noticed, sitting with a pile of letters before him at the opposite end of the room. The stranger looked rather Semitic in appearance, and had dark oily hair, with black beady eyes and sallow cheeks. He was very smartly dressed, however, and wore a profusion of jewellery. As Mrs. Bellingham mentioned his name he smiled ingratiatingly, and, removing a pair of cuff-protectors, offered Adrian a limp hand.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," he said with a slight lisp that indicated his origin even more than did his countenance. Then he gathered his papers together and glanced inquiringly at his employer.

"I think I've got all the particulars now," he remarked. "Perhaps I'd better send them out at once?"

"Yes, do," was the careless reply. "And tell the wretches of editors that if they don't put them in I'll stop advertising in their horrid papers. Good afternoon. I'll send for you when I want you again."

"Very good," returned the other suavely. Then, favouring Adrian with something between a leer and a wink, he walked out of the room with a cat-like tread.

"That's rather a terrible young man, isn't it?" said Mrs. Bellingham apologetically. "Still, he's a very useful creature. If you ever want to get anything into the papers

about yourself, Mr. Raphael will work it for you. By the way, if you want to make him your bosom friend pretend to take him for a Scotsman. He always tells every one that his ancestors came from Aberdeen. I dare say they did, but I'm pretty sure they stopped for some time in Palestine on the way."

"Thanks for the tip," said Adrian. "I don't know, though, that I'm too keen on cultivating Mr. Raphael, all the same."

A smile of amusement rippled across Mrs. Bellingham's face.

"Well, don't quarrel with him, at any rate," she remarked indifferently. "He isn't worth it. So you've seen Mr. Antony?" she went on in another tone.

"Yes. He says I'm to report myself here on Monday morning."

"I know. I've spoken to him about the matter. You ought to get on very well with us, Mr. Merrick. I think you'll like the company."

He looked up quickly, his eyes catching hers resting on him with a curious expression in them, half wistful, half amused.

"I'm sure I shall," he said softly.

Mrs. Bellingham smiled once more and went over to the table.

"You said that so nicely. You'll be turning all the ladies' heads here if you're not careful. Some of them are rather inflammable, I'm afraid. Now I'm going to give you a cup of tea. This is different from the South African veldt, isn't it?"

"It's a jolly sight pleasanter," he answered simply.

Mrs. Bellingham laughed again. She seemed in very good spirits this afternoon.

"I'll get you to tell me of your adventures there some day. I'm sure you've had lots," she added meaningly.

"Oh, they weren't particularly interesting," he returned, not quite understanding the sudden change in her tone.

"H'm, I think I know what that means. I wonder, though, if they were dark or fair?"

Adrian felt a little embarrassed. He had never met any one quite like Mrs. Bellingham before. As he was trying to think of a safer topic to discuss, some one tapped at the door and solved the problem for him.

"That's my call," she exclaimed. "Now you must run away. I've got to go on directly. We'll meet again next week."

On his way back he passed Constance Assheton standing in the wings. He thought she was looking very charming in her powdered hair and brocaded dress. The style evidently suited her to perfection. She turned round as he came up.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed brightly, "on the stage already, I see."

"Yes, it's not so difficult as people say."

"I'm afraid the difficulty comes along a bit later—for most of us, at any rate," she returned with something that sounded rather like a sigh.

"You oughtn't to find it so, Miss Assheton. Clever people aren't a bit too numerous."

She made him a little curtsey.

"It's very charming of you to say that; but you mustn't talk to me now, please."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because Mr. Keene is looking daggers at me already, and I'll be fined half a crown if I'm not in my place when the curtain goes up."

For the whole of the act that followed Constance Assheton occupied his attention a good deal. He thought her performance delightful; but it annoyed him extremely that in one part of it she had to play a love scene with Aubrey Hood. Had it been with any one else it would not have mattered particularly, he told himself. Hood, however, was really so very objectionable. It seemed an outrage—and he writhed at the sight—that such a man should place his arms round the girl's waist and draw her face to his.

Then he remembered that she had called him "Aubrey" in the restaurant that afternoon. The recollection was like a stream of cold water trickling down his spine.

He mentioned the matter casually to Marchmont, with whom he was dining that night, and inquired his opinion. The journalist, however, affected to regard it as being of no great consequence.

"If young women will go on the stage," he announced oracularly, "they must expect to be made love to by any play-acting Tom, Dick, or Harry who comes along. It's all in the day's—or rather, night's—work. Of course it's to be deplored; but there it is, and you can't get over it. I always regard it, though," he continued reflectively, "as a strong argument in favour of my contention that one never sees a really well-bred woman on the stage."

"Oh, rot! You're a prejudiced old buffer!" retorted Adrian incredulously.

"I dare say. Still, I'm not going to change my opinion."

"And you know perfectly well, too, that love-making on the stage is only pretence."

"I'm quite aware of that, my son," returned the other calmly. "Still, it doesn't make it any pleasanter for a man to see a girl he's fond of having to submit to being slobbered over by a greasy actor for so much a week and half salary for matinées. Well-bred women, too—as I said before—have a natural objection to earning money in this manner."

# IX

ALTHOUGH he refrained from showing it openly at the time, Adrian felt rather disheartened by his friend's uncomplimentary remarks concerning the profession which he himself was on the point of joining. Its members might not all be everything desirable, but they were much the same as other men and women. At any rate, they were human, and had hearts beating under their bosoms. Still, Marchmont was a trained observer, and a certain amount of weight, accordingly, attached to his words. While a good deal might safely be attributed to his habitual cynicism, and therefore not worth serious consideration, Adrian had an uneasy feeling at the back of his mind that Marchmont had not talked entirely without his book. The point he had made about the obligation devolving upon women to play love scenes with men who might, or might not, prove desirable was certainly a strong one. It irritated him to admit it; but he could not help doing so all the same. The more he tried to ignore it, the more insistently it clamoured for recognition.

He wondered what Constance Assheton's views on the subject were, and wished he felt intimate enough with her to inquire.

When he went to the rehearsal on the following Monday morning he made the acquaintance of the remainder of the company. They struck him as being for the most part pleasant enough, and also inclined to be friendly. One engaging young man, indeed, to whom he was introduced by Hood, proved so much so that he volunteered to show him

his Press notices if he would come up to his dressing-room for the purpose; and another sought his private opinion respecting the "reading" which he was giving of the particular lines entrusted to him. He was a pallid youth, whom Adrian had noticed striding up and down in a darkened corner of the stage, clutching spasmodically at his brow and muttering fiercely to himself.

"You've no idea what exhausting strains my art makes upon me, Mr. Merrick," he observed confidentially. "We actors don't have so easy a time of it as the public believes."

"I dare say not," returned Adrian politely, rather wondering at the same time who he was, as he could not remember having seen him in any very strenuous rôle. "Is your part a long one?"

The youth hesitated a little.

"Well, not particularly so—that is, as far as the mere number of lines goes," he admitted. "Still, it's very strong, and there's a lot of work in it."

Just then the stage manager called him and he hurried off to the wings. Adrian picked up the little brown-paper-covered book which he had thrown down and examined it with interest, curious to see the nature of the rôle which had such a disturbing effect upon its interpreter. It consisted of four lines, distributed over the same number of acts, the longest speeches reading: "My lord, it shall be done," and "Gentlemen, good evening."

Miss Mortimer, who, after Mrs. Bellingham, was the principal lady in the company, came up to Adrian. She was a tall, smart-looking young woman, with a great opinion of herself and a small one of every one else.

"I saw Launcelot Keith pouring out his troubles to you a moment ago," she remarked. "He's a weird youth."

"I think he's got the makings of an actor in him, though," said Constance Assheton, who always liked to speak kindly of every one.

"Then I wish he'd let them out of him sometimes," declared Miss Mortimer. "What do you say, Mr. Deane?"

"We can probably all play something quite well if only we're suitably cast."

"I doubt if Mr. Keith can play anything except ping-pong," declared Miss Mortimer, with a scornful curl of her lip. "He's rather deadly at that, I hear."

Felix Keene emerged from the wings and took up a position at a small table set near the footlights. He looked worried, and scarcely seemed in the best of tempers.

"I don't want to disturb any one's arrangements," he called out with laboured sarcasm, "but when you've all done talking I should like to make a start."

The little groups scattered about the stage broke up, leaving only those who were required for the first scene.

"Mrs. Bellingham isn't here yet," remarked Hood to Adrian in an undertone. "She'll probably turn up about an hour late and want us to go through the whole business again."

"There's only one class of people more selfish than actress-managéresses," announced Randall Holmes—a gloomy individual, who tried to look as though the cares of the entire theatre were upon his shoulders—"and that's actor-managers."

Adrian did not find the rehearsal particularly interesting. In contrast with its appearance at night the theatre seemed very depressing and cheerless. The stage was only partially lighted, and in place of scenery there was now nothing but bare whitewashed walls. A little daylight filtered feebly through a maze of crossbeams—arranged like a gigantic gridiron—overhead, or from a long narrow slit at the back opening on to the street. In front of the orchestra the darkened auditorium, with row upon row of seats shrouded in linen, yawned vast and cavernous. One effect of its emptiness was that every word spoken sounded curiously hollow, the echoes being caught up and apparently losing themselves among the cornices of the moulded ceiling. The gallery looked as though it were miles away, and Adrian could not help wondering how from that dizzy elevation any one on the stage could be either seen or heard.

As, in his capacity of understudy for Godfrey Deane, he had nothing to do during the commencement of the first act, he amused himself by watching those who were engaged in it. For the most part these did not appear to be particularly busy. Thus, Tommy Bedford, the comedian—now looking, by the way, as though limejuice were his favourite beverage—was reading a pink sporting paper, and Constance Assheton, sitting beside him, was placidly knitting. Near them Stella Mortimer and Aubrey Hood conversed together in low tones. The fact that the scenery had been struck made Adrian unable to appreciate the fact that, technically speaking, none of these people were really "on" at the moment. Such stage business as was now taking place appeared to be confined to a somewhat dejected-looking band of "extra" ladies and gentlemen who figured on the programme under the comprehensive title of "courtiers." Felix Keene evidently regarded their efforts with scant approval.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed witheringly, as he threw down his prompt-book and went up to their leader, "but you're a bright lot of barnstormers, I must say! You're supposed to be a rollicking band of the King's favourites, and you look about as cheerful as a pack of funeral mutes who aren't certain of getting paid. Now then, try again. Don't forget, I want to see you rollick this time!"

The second attempt met with no better success, and the sickly grin which the company instantly assumed drove their instructor almost frantic.

"For heaven's sake, don't do that!" he shouted angrily. "You look as though some one had been treading on your silly faces!"

"Well, sir, it's not very easy to look cheerful for eighteenpence a night," returned a girl with spirit.

"Oh, isn't it, my beauty?" was the sharp reply. "Well, I'll see what you look like for nothing at all a night if I have any more of your back answers! Now, my little dears, we'll try again."

By dint of threats and abuse, with occasional intervals of flattery, Keene succeeded at last in getting the act to go as he wanted it. Adrian watched him with growing surprise and indignation, for although some of the company were undoubtedly awkward and anything but intelligent, he saw no reason why they should not be treated with ordinary politeness. He expressed his opinion on the subject to Miss Assheton.

"It's nothing to worry about," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "One soon gets used to it. Compared with some managers, Keene is the pink of politeness."

"Then I don't want to meet any of the other sort," he replied.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to help yourself," declared Stella Mortimer, who overheard the remark.

While Godfrey Deane was on the stage, Adrian watched the proceedings with special interest, wondering how he would acquit himself as Captain Westcott if ever he were called upon to play the part. There was no knowing when, as an understudy, he might not be wanted to do so. Deane, however, looked distressingly healthy. Still, as Constance Assheton whispered to him, accidents did happen sometimes even in the best-regulated theatres. The part had been posted to him a couple of days earlier, and he was already word-perfect in it.

Presently the stage manager called to him.

"Let's see what you can do with those lines now, Mr. Merrick," he said.

Feeling a little nervous, for he knew that every one was watching him closely, Adrian took Deane's place. Stella Mortimer spoke his cue, and he delivered the opening lines. At first the sound of his voice in the big empty theatre made him rather self-conscious, and once, in the middle of a speech, he hesitated, and then stopped short altogether.

"What are you stopping for?" demanded Keene.

Adrian looked up, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

"Is it all right?" he asked shyly.

"I'd tell you fast enough if it wasn't."

Thus encouraged, he went on again, gathering confidence every moment. At the end of the scene the stage manager rose from his chair.

"Not half bad," he observed critically. "A little quicker in taking up your cues, and not so much dropping your voice when a sentence is half over, and you'll do at a pinch."

A voice rang out of one of the boxes on the dress-circle tier—

"I think it's a very good performance, Mr. Keene, and so does Mr. Elliott. We'll be with you directly."

Adrian looked up quickly and saw Mrs. Bellingham emerge from behind a curtain. She smiled encouragingly as she caught his eye. Then she disappeared, and a moment later he saw her coming through the pass-door that led on to the stage. With her was a rather commonplace-looking man, whom he recognized as the author.

"Good morning every one," exclaimed Mrs. Bellingham, as she swept across the stage in a picture hat and trailing skirt. "How do you do, Mr. Merrick? You haven't met Mr. Harrison Elliott, I believe. Mr. Merrick," she added to her companion, "is our latest recruit."

The dramatist adjusted an eyeglass and inspected Adrian critically. Apparently he was not very conversationally inclined, for after giving vent to a grunt that might have been expressive of pleasure at the meeting, or the reverse, he stalked away to speak to Miss Mortimer.

"You mightn't think it, perhaps," observed Mrs. Bellingham, "but Mr. Elliott is quite chatty at times." Then she turned to Keene.

"Mr. Elliott wants to run through the second act now. We've decided on making some trifling alterations which will strengthen some of the parts that aren't brought out quite prominently enough."

The minor members of the company brightened up visibly at the announcement. At last recognition was to be accorded their genius. People entrusted with three lines saw them-

selves in imagination thrilling a hushed and enraptured audience with new and lengthy speeches, and one or two of the more optimistic retired to dark corners and began to practise taking "calls." Their fond hopes, however, were destined to be rudely shattered, for it very soon became evident that Mrs. Bellingham's idea of "strengthening" the play as a whole was merely to lengthen her own part by the simple expedient of cutting down all the remaining ones.

During the ten minutes' interval that followed on the conclusion of the first act, advantage was taken of Mrs. Bellingham's temporary absence to give vent to loud murmurs. While the principals discussed their grievances in comparative privacy, the others were more outspoken.

"She's a cat!" declared Mabel Warren disgustedly to Launcelot Keith, who was bewailing that his four lines of dialogue had already been reduced to three, and that there was every possibility of these being cut out altogether before the rehearsal ended.

"And she can't say that I didn't knock 'em with that last speech of mine," continued the youth dejectedly. "I as nearly as possible got a call for it on the first night. In fact, I did get one, only that jealous bounder Antony wouldn't let me take it."

"It's this eternal jealousy that ruins the Profession, dear boy," announced the lugubrious Randall Holmes. "I give you my word, old fellow," he added, buttonholing Adrian, who chanced to be nearest him, "but when actresses get into management they think they've bought the earth."

"Well, I've nothing to complain of personally."

The tragedian eyed him with gloomy wonder. An actor who had no grievance was almost something beyond his comprehension.

"Ah, well, you're young at the game. When you've been at it as long as I have you'll think like me."

Devoutly hoping that he would do nothing of the sort, Adrian moved off to speak to somebody else. As he did so,

the author, who had been sitting in the stalls during the progress of the act—apparently absorbed in a newspaper—came on to the stage. He was instantly besieged with applications to put things back again in their original form. They did not, however, get much sympathy from him.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," he declared brusquely. "There's no satisfying some of you people. You're all alike. It's quite enough trouble to write a play, without being badgered afterwards to alter it to suit individual tastes. If you don't like your parts you know your remedy, I suppose? Anyway, go and complain to Mrs. Bellingham, not to me."

The suggestion was received in stony silence. Evidently it was not a popular one. The dramatist grinned sardonically and stalked away.

"It's all very well advising us to complain to Mrs. Bellingham," observed Stella Mortimer, "but that won't do us much good."

"I tried it once," remarked somebody else reminiscently.

"Did you get any satisfaction, my dear?"

"Well, it depends how you look at it. You see, it was a fortnight's notice."

Felix Keene, with Mrs. Bellingham and Antony, came down the passage leading from the dressing-rooms, and went to his place at the prompt side.

"Clear, please!" he called out in the brisk tone that he kept for the theatre. "Beginners, second act."

In obedience to the summons every one not required to be on the stage at the moment withdrew to the wings. Then the signal was given and the rehearsal began again. Constance Assheton happened to be going through a scene with Aubrey Hood and Bedford. The business manager watched her coldly. Apparently her performance did not please his critical taste, for he suddenly turned away and held a whispered conversation with Mrs. Bellingham.

"What do you think you're doing, Miss Assheton?" he called out sharply.

Constance stopped in the middle of the speech she was delivering.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Antony. I'm playing my part, of course."

Antony gave a laugh that sounded like the snapping of a dry stick.

"Oh, are you?" he retorted brutally. "I didn't recognize it."

The other crimsoned with mortification. Adrian, watching her, thought she was going to take refuge in tears. Suddenly, Mr. Elliott asserted himself.

"It's all right," he said. "I know how I want the part played."

"Oh, very well," returned Antony in a conciliatory tone, as he went back to his seat. "If you're satisfied, Mr. Elliott, I am. Go on, please, Miss Assheton."

The manager's rudeness made Adrian almost wild with indignation. He looked round to see what the others thought of it. No one, however, appeared to have been paying the slightest attention to the little scene that had just occurred. Mrs. Bellingham, indeed, was calmly turning over the pages of a lady's paper.

Suddenly she seemed to perceive that Adrian was regarding her in no very approving fashion. She raised a hand and beckoned him to her side.

"Pray don't glare at poor me like that, Mr. Merrick," she said in a low voice. "You looked as though you were thinking the most dreadful things."

"I beg your pardon," he replied stiffly, "but——"

Mrs. Bellingham heaved a plaintive little sigh, suggestive of gentle resignation with the ways of an unkind Fate.

"Yes, I quite understand. No doubt you thought I ought to have interfered a moment ago for Miss Assheton's benefit. I find it necessary, though, to leave these matters entirely to Mr. Antony's discretion."

The spell of the long-lashed eyes and soft pleading voice

was irresistible. Adrian's momentary resentment broke down before it utterly.

"That's right," added Mrs. Bellingham encouragingly, as she noted the change in his face. "Now we're friends again."

It was not until nearly three o'clock that the long-drawn-out rehearsal came to an end. As he was walking away from the theatre he met Constance Assheton at the top of the street. The troubled look in her face touched him.

"Please don't think me very rude," he began diffidently, "but I can't help saying how sorry I was to hear you being bullied just now. It made me furious."

She looked at him wistfully.

"I'd much rather you didn't say anything about it. After all, it really doesn't matter. It's the sort of thing that happens every day."

Adrian regarded her in amazement.

"Vulgar ruffians like Antony shouldn't be permitted to control theatres," he protested hotly.

Constance shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of indifference.

"Mr. Antony's a long way better than some managers I've known. If the piece were a success he'd be quite charming."

"That's no reason why he should be uncivil now."

"Perhaps not; but then, you see, he's a theatrical manager."

The matter-of-fact tone in which the announcement was made struck Adrian curiously.

"And therefore I mustn't expect him to behave like an ordinary person?" he observed.

"You'll waste your time if you do."

They had reached the top of the street by this time, and stood for a moment to watch the apparently never-ending stream of buses that passed backwards and forwards. It was a blazing afternoon, so hot indeed that the arid Strand, with its long line of sunblinds over the shops and row of dejected-

looking men standing in the gutter and doing a brisk business in the sale of fans, brought back to Adrian a swift vision of Cape Town. In his mind's eye he could see the long unlovely thoroughfare of Adderley Street again. A little group of khaki-clad soldiers coming out of a public-house, and a white-helmeted policeman directing the traffic, increased the resemblance. There was the same cloudless blue sky overhead, and the same procession of cabs drawn by tired horses crawling along the edge of the pavement. He wondered if he might venture to ask his companion to go across the road with him to Fuller's for a cup of tea or an ice. She was looking rather fatigued, and it would do her good, he thought. Just as he was about to make the suggestion, she took the matter out of his hands.

"Here's my bus coming. I must say good-bye now, as I have to hurry back. We'll meet again to-night, though. I wonder if there'll be a good house."

"There ought to be," returned Adrian, with a laugh, "because I'm making my debut this evening. If that doesn't send up the booking nothing will!"

# X

CONSTANCE ASSHETON climbed slowly to the top of the bus and sat down. The inside was crowded and stuffy, and she wanted air. There was not too much of it, however, even outside, and the only disengaged seat was over at the back, next to a spotty-faced youth, who reduced the supply still further by puffing at an evil-smelling cigar. He seemed to have such difficulty in keeping it alight that she began to wish he would give up the attempt altogether. She wished, too, that Adrian had come with her, for the other's admiring glances were rather disturbing. Near Charing Cross he tried to enter into conversation by observing that it was "very 'ot." He derived such little encouragement, however, that he hastily descended. As he went down the steps Constance heard him speak to the conductor.

"My word!" he said, with a significant glance towards herself, "but these 'ere play-actresses do give 'emselves airs. A gent can't pass a civil remark to some of 'em, but what they look as though they'd been insulted!"

At the bottom of Parliament Street she left the bus, and, walking across Westminster Bridge, changed into a tram that went along the Kennington Road. About half-way down she got out and entered a dreary little street debouching into the main thoroughfare, with rows of depressing-looking houses—each exactly like its neighbour—on either side. A humorously inclined County Council had named it Park Grove, and imaginative landladies advertised it in the "Era" as "ten minutes from West End theatres." Constance knew

the street well, every yard—from the big flaunting public-house at the corner, to the gloomy board school at the upper end—being unpleasantly familiar. For more than three years—broken by brief intervals when touring in the provinces—Park Grove had been her London address.

She opened the gateway of No. 14 and went up the little path that bisected the dusty strip of coarse turf that Mrs. Waggett, her landlady, dignified by the name of "garden." No flowers bloomed there, however, and such birds as came to feast on the crumbs which she threw out every morning had long ago forgotten how to sing. Sometimes she almost wondered if they had ever known how to. Still, with all its drawbacks, the house—in comparison with those that flanked it, at any rate—was not unattractive. Its window curtains were fresh and clean, the doorstep was spotless, and the knocker and name plate sparkled in the sunlight.

Mrs. Waggett—who, although an extremely lachrymose lady, nevertheless prided herself on always taking a cheerful view of life—bustled into the little sitting-room as her lodger entered it. She had been employed as a dresser in a minor theatre at one time, and on this account still regarded herself as being intimately connected with the stage.

"Here's your tea, miss," she announced, putting down a tray. "I dare say you'd like a cup."

"Thanks," said Constance listlessly, "I should. It's frightfully hot to-day."

"You're right, miss. I wonder how you stand it, I'm sure. As I used to tell poor dear Waggett, people don't know what we actresses 'ave to go through. In weather like this one gets to 'ate the very sight of a theayter!"

"It's my work," returned Constance rather wearily, "so it's no good grumbling."

"And precious 'ard work it is, too," went on the other, who was conversationally inclined, "as no one knows better than myself. Lor' bless you, miss, when I was at the Surrey I used to think I'd never get through the evening sometimes. It was only my drop of gin that kept me up at all.

As you was saying a moment ago, play-acting is a 'ard and thankless job, with nothing but the workhouse to look forward to at the end. Thanks be, 'owever, my motter 'as always been to look on the bright side o' things. And that reminds me there's an account in this afternoon's extry 'Star' of a young lady who swallered some laudanum yesterday morning because she was out of an engagement. I'll send Annie to you with the paper directly. A bit of reading does cheer one up, don't it? You must excuse me now, miss, but there's the second floor back ringing his dratted bell."

Then, to the other's relief, she disappeared to attend to her domestic duties.

As the door closed behind the capacious form of Mrs. Waggett, Constance sank exhausted into a chair. The atmosphere was stifling, and such air as came through the heavily draped window was like a hot blast. She looked round the little sitting-room languidly. In its furniture and arrangements it was frankly theatrical, and resembled scores of similar rooms that she had lived in when touring. There was the same horrible "parlour suite"—the chairs stuffed with blue velvet, on which was worked a violent pattern in red and blue—the same stiff antimacassars pinned rigidly over the back and cushions of the lumpy sofa, the same stand of wax flowers on the mantelpiece, and the same fat family Bible resting underneath a plush-framed portrait of the landlady's late husband. She had never yet been in any theatrical lodgings where the husband happened to be alive. When she first went on the stage the mortality among them as a class had sometimes alarmed her seriously.

To a certain extent, however, and with the lukewarm approval of Mrs. Waggett, Constance had softened the asperities of the room by distributing about it some books and photographs of her own. When they were not unduly expensive, too, she always had a bowl of flowers on the mantelpiece, although her landlady would openly protest that the waxen atrocity under the glass shade was infinitely

more beautiful than anything that Nature ever produced. Constance, however, could never look at it without a shudder. The whole house, indeed, revolted her, but she felt bound to admit that it had its advantages. In the first place it was cheap, then it was clean, and, finally, the landlady was honest. She knew from bitter experience that, so far as theatrical lodgings went, these were points to be prized highly.

Her thoughts ran on the afternoon's rehearsal that was just concluded. The little scene with the business manager was but a repetition of many others that had occurred. Under ordinary circumstances she would not have thought anything of it, but to-day somehow it seemed to rankle. When she had first gone on the stage it had been rather a bitter discovery that she could not count as a matter of course on being treated as a lady by every man with whom she came into contact. Since then, however, a good many illusions had been stripped away. At times she wondered how it was that she had any left at all. In three years she had learned a great deal, and some of the lessons had been very hard ones. She knew, though, that—in comparison with lots of other girls of her acquaintance—she had much to congratulate herself upon. At any rate, she was in a London theatre and playing a fairly important part, while scores of actresses with twice her experience—if not twice her talent—seemed perpetually condemned to the drudgery of provincial touring

Constance Assheton would have been the first to acknowledge that the stage was the grave of illusions. She had buried so many of her own there, that at one time she used to feel as though their pale ghosts were haunting her. High hopes and lofty endeavours were always withering in the fierce glare of the footlights that looked so fascinating, when viewed from the auditorium. She had dreamed dreams—dear, delightful dreams of winning success and recognition—and watched them fade slowly and then flicker out altogether. There could surely be no calling so utterly pitiless. And yet

the army of ready recruits never waned in the slightest. She knew that if she stepped aside for a moment hundreds would fight to fill the tiny gap. The knowledge often made her shudder.

As she ran over the day's events her thoughts turned instinctively to Adrian. She recalled with a pleased flush the indignant glance he had shot at Antony when that person had spoken to her so rudely. Every one else, however, had taken the manager's boorishness as a matter of course. She wondered why Adrian Merrick had proved an exception. Then she remembered he was new to the stage. This, no doubt, was the reason. She wondered, though—and she caught at her breath a little as she did so—if there were any other reason as well. The look in his eyes when they had said good-bye in the Strand was plainly eloquent of a feeling of something more than casual interest. The knowledge was delightful, and she hugged it shyly to herself. Since the day when she had first met him, Adrian had been in her thoughts a good deal—more, indeed, than she would have been prepared to admit if questioned on the subject. He interested and attracted her for a hundred reasons, and she found herself continually contrasting him with the other members of the company. Certainly, in comparison with these, he showed to advantage. For one thing, if not so strikingly handsome as Aubrey Hood, he was none the less exceedingly good-looking. Then he was well dressed, deferential in his manner, and frankly unaffected. Above all, he was a gentleman. This last in itself was more than sufficient to make him stand out prominently, for the presence of well-bred men on the stage was somewhat rare in her experience. At any rate, she had come into contact with very few.

At six o'clock Mrs. Waggett reappeared, accompanied by a small maidservant bringing in dinner. It was not a desirable hour to dine at, but it was a convenient one. Constance knew by experience that if she put off the meal until later she would not reach the theatre in time to dress

comfortably before the curtain rose. She disliked hurrying over so important an operation.

There were two letters lying on the tray beside the vegetable dish. The landlady drew her attention to them, and waited somewhat pointedly as though to suggest that she ought to be apprised of their contents. It was evident, though, that Constance did not share this view, for she put the letters on the mantelpiece and began to read an evening paper.

As soon as she was alone, however, she took the letters up and looked at them inquiringly. Then she opened the first. It proved to be a business communication from a theatrical costumier's, and begged to direct her "kind attention" to the firm's "bargains in tights," and guaranteed "every satisfaction." She tore it into fragments, lest Mrs. Waggett's delicate susceptibilities should be shocked, and examined the other letter. The words, "Carter's Dramatic Agency," embossed on the flap, roused her interest at once. Tearing it open, she read the typed enclosure eagerly:—

CARTER'S DRAMATIC AGENCY,
WELLINGTON STREET, STRAND,
15 *May*.

DEAR MADAM,

We should be glad to learn, at esteemed convenience, if you are free for the autumn. Mr. Buckley Ryder (the Ryder Comedy Combination Company) is sending out a company on tour with "Mary Jane." He saw your performance in "Whitehall" on Thursday night, and thinks you would do for Polly Perkins (dashing soubrette). Tour opens T.R. Birkenhead, 6 October; Grand, Middlesbrough, to follow. Terms small but certain. If disengaged, kindly favour us with a call, Monday, 10 a.m. prompt, bringing last two references and photo in tights, which will be strictly inquired into.

Yours truly,
HILDEBRAND CARTER.

She put the letter away in her writing-case and sat down again.

"I must be getting sought after," she said to herself, and the idea was rather pleasing. So far she had always been obliged to seek for her own engagements, and the necessity for doing so had been an ever present nightmare. There was no occasion, though, she decided after a little reflection, to accept this offer. The Embankment piece would run for a few weeks at any rate, and when it was withdrawn Mrs. Bellingham would probably take her on tour.

As she went down to the theatre, however, for the evening performance, her thoughts still ran on the agent's letter. Hildebrand Carter was a useful individual, and it was only politic to keep on good terms with him. The best thing to do would be to write a diplomatic note, to the effect that while the great demand on her services prevented her accepting his offer for the present, she might be able to take advantage of it later on.

When she reached the theatre she found Stella Mortimer, who shared a dressing-room with her, poring over the advertisements in the "Era."

"I see that 'Mary Jane' is going out this autumn," she observed.

"I know," returned Constance. "I've had the offer of a part, in case I don't fix up anything else."

"But surely you're not going to take it, my dear?"

"I don't want to, certainly, but I may have to. Mrs. Bellingham hasn't said anything to me yet about her own tour. By the way, what's the piece like? I was out of town when it was produced. I read about it, though. It's a bit—well, you know—isn't it?"

Stella laughed carelessly.

"A bit thick, my dear? I should just think it was! It's an adaptation from the French, you know, and was a huge success in Paris. Clarence Pott spread himself over a whole column of the 'Daily Courier,' demanding to know how it had got licensed. All the other papers gave it beans, too.

Douglas Marchmont, who writes for the 'Herald,' said that the morals appeared to have fallen overboard during the Channel passage. The natural result was that every one wanted to go and see it."

"It doesn't sound quite like a Sunday-school entertainment," observed Constance thoughtfully, as she began to make-up. "However, it doesn't matter, as I shan't apply for the post. After you with the looking-glass. There's that wretched call boy shouting 'overture and beginners, half an hour, please,' already!"

When she went down to the stage the first person she saw was Adrian. He seemed remarkably self-possessed, and not in the least nervous.

"Well, how do you feel, Mr. Merrick?" she demanded. "You look calm enough."

"Thanks, I don't think I shall break down. I'm word-perfect, at any rate, as one of the 'shouts off.' By the way, though, I've had rather a shock to find that I'm billed merely in the list of 'courtiers, soldiers, guests, etc.,' instead of having a line to myself on the programme with all the other great actors. Mr. Launcelot Keith says I ought to throw up my part, but I don't want to spoil the play's chances."

Constance laughed.

"You're lucky, Mr. Merrick, to have your name mentioned at all. When I first burst on the theatrical world I was simply put down among the 'and others.'"

"What a shame!" said Adrian impetuously. "You ought to have a theatre of your own, Miss Assheton."

She dropped him a curtsey.

"Thank you," she returned, smiling. "When I do, you shall be my leading man."

"I won't forget."

"Nor I," she answered slowly.

Adrian was about to say something when he saw her face change swiftly. The friendly smile which a moment earlier had lighted it up died away, and a look of vague uneasiness

took its place. As he turned round to discover the cause, he became conscious that Mrs. Bellingham and Aubrey Hood had just come through the swing door leading from the dressing-room passage. It seemed to him that they were regarding his companion in no very friendly fashion. Almost immediately, however, Mrs. Bellingham assumed her customary expression of extreme amiability.

"Good evening, Miss Assheton. Good evening, Mr. Merrick. Feeling all right, I hope?"

"Yes, thank you."

Mrs. Bellingham nodded and rustled away, saying something to Hood in a low tone. Adrian turned round to speak to Constance again, but she had disappeared. He caught sight of her a moment later, however, standing on the opposite side of the stage. The troubled look in her eyes puzzled him. He was wondering what it meant, when Godfrey Deane came up. He smiled rather curiously as he noted the direction of the other's glance.

"What's the matter with Mrs. Bellingham?" he asked. "She's looking as black as thunder."

"Nothing that I know of," returned Adrian. "She was here a moment ago, when I was talking to Miss Assheton."

Deane chuckled sardonically.

"That accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nut then."

"What do you mean?" demanded Adrian quickly.

"Well, my dear chap, surely you know by this time that Mrs. Bellingham doesn't care about seeing the men in her company taking notice of any lady but herself?"

Adrian stared at him in amazement.

"Rot!"

"It sounds like it, I know," observed the other calmly. "All the same, it's the solemn truth. Accordingly, I should advise you to dissemble your—er—regard for the remainder of the company—that is, the lady members—unless you're anxious to get them into hot water."

Adrian shrugged his shoulders and walked away, for the curtain was about to rise. He tried to tell himself that

Deane was joking, but the attempt was not very successful. The thought that he might possibly have made things unpleasant for Miss Assheton weighed heavily on him.

As the muffled strains of the overture died away, Felix Keene stepped to the switchboard.

"Clear, please!" he called out warningly. "Mr. Hood, Miss Assheton, and crowd—stand by!"

There was a general movement, and Adrian found himself being piloted into his position by an energetic super-master. Then, almost before he realized it, a sudden blaze of light flooded the stage, and the curtain masking the proscenium opening shot upwards with a swift, noiseless movement. A moment later and the play had begun.

Until his eyes became accustomed to the fierce glare from the footlights, Adrian could not distinguish any one in the audience beyond the occupants of the first row of stalls. The rest of the house appeared simply a confused blur. Presently, however, he found himself able to make out the features of those sitting further back. In one of the boxes on the second tier he caught a glimpse of Antony. He could see that the business manager was watching the stage in a curiously intent fashion. The expression on his cold, impassive face was not encouraging, and Adrian felt instinctively that he was looking for something to find fault with. He was glad that, in the first scene at any rate, his own part called for no particular effort, for he suddenly realized that rehearsal was a very different matter from an actual performance. The chance of playing Captain Westcott did not appear so enticing now.

He went up to the dressing-room at the end of the act and found Deane reading an evening paper, while Bedford, sitting on a basket trunk, was smoking a cigarette in defiance of a notice that threatened all sorts of penalties to any one doing such a thing. The comedian nodded genially.

"Hullo, young Beerbohm Tree! Did you get a call?"

"No, that's coming after the next act."

"How do you think the audience is taking the piece to-night?" inquired Deane.

"Pretty well. At any rate, there have been no casualties so far."

"My old squaw is in front to-night," observed Bedford. "I asked Antony for a dress-circle seat, but the swine said unless the missus chose to have a pit order I couldn't have anything at all. He wanted to tell me the business was too big."

"Well, the house certainly looks full," said Adrian.

Bedford laughed derisively.

"Paper, my boy," he retorted. "You can positively hear it rustle!"

"I think the stalls are all right," declared Deane. "The dress-circle, though, is full of back numbers in Bayswater blouses and Smart Set gents in made-up ties. Hullo!" he added, as a shrill voice was heard echoing along the corridor, "there's that damned call boy bellowing out for the second act!"

# XI

DESPITE the lukewarm reception it met with at the hands of the eminent critics who had sat in judgment upon it on the first night, "Whitehall" slowly but surely began to win its way into public favour. Audiences increased nightly, and quite a respectable *queue* would be seen forming outside the pit and gallery every evening an hour before the doors opened. A rumour was even circulated in the dressing-rooms to the effect that Antony had been seen to smile when coming out of the box office one afternoon. It was not widely credited, however, until, for the first time in the history of the piece, the "House Full" boards were displayed at the entrance ten minutes after the curtain rose.

According to the freely expressed opinion of the minor members of the company, this gratifying state of affairs was due solely to their own histrionic efforts.

"I told you how it would be," remarked Launcelot Keith complacently to Bedford. "As soon as the public get to know that there are good people in the cast they'll always come to see a show. I'm thinking of asking Antony to raise my screw."

"Do," drawled Bedford with a grin. "It would be interesting to hear the result."

The other's face flushed.

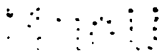
"You may say what you like," he retorted, "but the man on 'Footlight Bits' said my performance stood out!"

"Well, if you argue the point with our courteous business manager," returned the comedian, "he'll probably tell you that it will stand out altogether. At any rate, that's what

happened to the last chap that asked for an increase of salary."

As a matter of fact, the person chiefly responsible for the sudden popularity of Mrs. Bellingham's venture was Raphael Montagu. In the discharge of his functions as the theatre's publicity agent, that astute individual had sedulously filled the papers with attractively composed paragraphs referring to the play. He had also successfully inaugurated a correspondence on the subject in the religious Press, which secured the piece several columns of free advertisement every day. Writing under the pseudonym of "Father of Daughters," he had commenced operations by characterizing it as an "immoral entertainment," and then, as "Country Curate," he had taken the opposite view. The bait was consumed eagerly, and in a very short time all classes of theatre-goers were airing their opinions vigorously. An eminent lady novelist joined in the discussion, contributing thereto the thrilling intelligence that the Embankment production had "outraged her best feelings"; and another who was still waiting to become eminent certified that the performance "made life better and brighter for all who witnessed it." When the correspondence showed signs of waning, the fertile brain of Mr. Montagu conceived fresh schemes for stimulating interest in Harrison Elliott's drama. A charge of plagiarism against the author was raised in an obscure organ, and triumphantly demolished in an important one. Three men (who, by the way, bore suspicious resemblances to members of the stage-carpenter's staff) were fined at Bow Street for disturbing the audience by cheering vociferously throughout the first act, and a report was spread that an American "trust" had acquired the play for a term of fifty years. Mrs. Bellingham expressed her surprise and annoyance at this notoriety to all the interviewers who represented influential papers, and wrote a long signed article in the one with the biggest circulation to say that she disliked publicity.

Adrian found the members of the company to improve



rather upon closer acquaintance. Although he could not get over his objection to Aubrey Hood, he felt bound to admit that the leading man was, for his part, civil enough to him and quite inclined to be friendly. Even the grim Antony became in time almost cordial.

It was with Godfrey Deane, however, that he grew most intimate. He introduced him to Marchmont one day, and was delighted to find that that exigent individual approved of him.

"For an actor he's not half a bad sort of chap," announced Marchmont judicially when his candid opinion was requested.

"Oh, come, I'm an actor myself."

"Are you?" returned the other blandly. "Well, I'll keep your secret."

In his relations with the ladies at the Embankment Adrian also got on very well. Most of them seemed to take their cue from Mrs. Bellingham, who continued to evince a partiality for his society that at times he found a little embarrassing. He could see that the manner in which she would single him out to talk to before the curtain went up each night was becoming noticed. Miss Mortimer's meaning nods and smiles when she saw them together gave him the first hint of this. Their effect, however, was not what she anticipated.

"I wish that young woman would mind her own business," he muttered angrily to himself one evening, as he observed her glance towards the leading lady and himself, and then whisper to Mabel Warren. "I shall have to show her that I'm going to talk to Mrs. Bellingham as much as I jolly well please!"

A remark that Constance Assheton made the next night, however, induced him to regard the matter from a different standpoint. Of late he had experienced an uneasy feeling that Constance was rather avoiding him, and he began to wonder if there might not be something after all in what Godfrey Deane had said. He told himself that the idea was

absurd, but it refused to be dismissed all the same. At last he resolved to settle the matter definitely. Going down a little earlier than usual to the theatre one night, he met her just outside the stage door.

"Look here," he said boldly, "you've got a good fifteen minutes yet before you need think of getting ready. Don't waste them in a stuffy dressing-room."

"Well, what else is there to do, Mr. Merrick?"

"Come for a walk along the Embankment. I want to talk to you. It seems that I never get a chance of doing so now."

The girl's face flushed a little.

"Whose fault is that?" she asked slowly. "I might say that you haven't shown any great desire for my society. I'm not Mrs. Bellingham, of course, but still——"

"And I'm jolly glad you're not," interrupted Adrian.

Something in his tone appealed to the other. The resentment melted from her glance and a shy smile began to gather about the corners of her mouth.

"Why?" she demanded softly.

"Because you're much nicer as you are."

"Thank you," returned Constance demurely. "After that I don't think that I can refuse to walk as far as the bridge and back with you."

He led the way along the Embankment. They did not talk much during the short walk, for, now that an understanding between them was restored, words seemed almost superfluous. Constance, too, appeared rather preoccupied, and he for his part was quite content to be merely in her company. She was looking particularly charming, he thought, as they gazed over the parapet at the sluggish river and watched the sun slowly sinking in the direction of Chelsea.

She turned away with a little sigh of satisfaction.

"It's like a Whistler picture, isn't it? I love the river."

The words suggested something to Adrian's mind.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "I've got an idea,

Miss Assheton—I have them sometimes. If it's fine, will you come on the river with me next Sunday? We'll go to Henley, and I'll get a friend of mine—a man called Marchmont—to join us. I think you'll like him."

The other seemed to hesitate, but only for a moment.

"I'd love to," she said frankly. "Tell me, is this Mr. Marchmont an actor?"

"No."

"I'm glad of that. It's such a relief to get away occasionally from the atmosphere of the theatre. I dare say you yourself have found that the society of actors and actresses begins to pall after a time?"

"That depends on the actors and actresses," returned Adrian. Then, realizing that the conversation threatened to revert to Mrs. Bellingham, he began to talk of the forthcoming expedition. He was in the midst of it, when the deep booming of a clock made his companion look at her watch.

"That's seven striking," she observed. "It takes me an hour to get ready, so we must be starting back now."

When he reached his dressing-room five minutes later, Adrian found that Godfrey Deane had already arrived. There were a couple of letters for him, which the other had brought up among his own. He looked at them critically, for each was addressed in a woman's handwriting, and the envelopes were tinted and had monograms on the flaps.

"I expect Sir Charles Wyndham and Alexander have been writing to you to know what you'll take to stop acting," remarked Deane.

"They'd be more likely to wire," returned Adrian. "These appear to have come from what Bedford calls the 'fair sex.' We'll see what the little dears have to say, though."

"I fancy they're from autograph hunters. I've just had an application for mine from a man who says he wants it very badly."

"Why don't you give it to him, then?"

"Well, he happens to be my tailor, and he happens to want it on a cheque."

Adrian opened his letters and glanced through them rapidly. The first was from a sporting tipster, offering to supply him with a winner for Ascot, and the second was from a money lender, who appeared anxious to accommodate him "in any amount up to £5000 on note of hand, and without preliminary fees or vexatious inquiries." He threw the documents across the room and began to dress.

"I thought I spotted the handwriting," observed Deane reflectively. "These alluring offers are sent out broadcast to pro's. Rather an entertaining episode in connexion with this sort of thing happened at the club the other day. You know how Hood is always boasting of his conquests, don't you? Well, about a month ago Tommy Bedford was favoured with one of these precious epistles. He stuck it into a pink envelope with forget-me-nots on the flap, and got a girl to address it to Aubrey Hood. Then he went down to the club and put it in the rack. In walked Master Aubrey. When the waiter brought him the letter he read it with his usual smirk and tore it up. Some one who was in the secret chaffed him about getting a *billet-doux*. 'It's only another silly woman who wants me to take her out to supper,' said Aubrey."

Adrian laughed. The story seemed characteristic of its subject.

"Hood has been rather civil to me of late," he remarked.

"Then, depend upon it, he wants to get something out of you."

"Rot!" returned Adrian, as he hurried downstairs and went on to the stage.

Four nights later, as he was leaving the theatre, the call boy brought him a somewhat peremptorily worded message to the effect that Mrs. Bellingham wanted to see him at once. Rather wondering what it meant, and with an uneasy feeling that the summons portended trouble of some sort—perhaps even dismissal—he went to her dressing-room. The

old radiant smile with which he was received, however, effectively drove away his fears. He watched her flawless face closely. The excitement of the evening's work seemed to have given it a fresh beauty.

"You can go," she said to the dresser, a stout woman, who looked at him rather curiously, Adrian thought, as soon as he came in.

The moment they were alone she held out her hand.

"Well, here you are at last, Mr. Merrick!" she exclaimed. "I haven't had a word with you for ages. Why have you been avoiding me in this manner all the week? Am I so very terrible?"

Adrian blushed in spite of himself.

"I didn't know you wanted to talk to me," he stammered.

Mrs. Bellingham laughed lightly. Then a troubled look came into her eyes, and her beautiful face clouded.

"Didn't you?" she murmured softly. "Well, I did. However, now you are here," she continued in another tone, "I'll take this opportunity of doing so. Please sit down and smoke a cigarette. It always puts men in a good temper. Some men, though, want a whole box!"

"Thanks," said Adrian, as he took out his case, "but one will be enough for me. I don't know, though, that I really require it."

Mrs. Bellingham smiled and sat down on the sofa beside him. Her hand, wandering over the cushion, touched his with a reassuring pressure.

"I believe you. Listen to me, my friend. I want you to come to supper with me. Mr. Elliott will be there, and we're going to talk business. The fact is, various changes are being made in the cast here, and he and I both think that you can play a certain part that will soon be vacant. You won't say no, I suppose?"

"Certainly not. What is the part, though?"

"Captain Westcott."

"Captain Westcott? That's Mr. Deane's part."

"At present it is, but I don't think it will be so much

longer—at any rate, not when we tour. Godfrey Deane is only engaged for the run of the piece in town. He has had an offer to go to the St. George's, and wants me to release him. By the way, all this is in confidence, you understand."

"Of course," returned Adrian, outwardly calm, but inwardly consumed with excitement. He had no desire to occupy anybody else's shoes—Godfrey Deane's least of all; but if a vacancy presented itself—well, that was another thing altogether.

"Then we might start," said Mrs. Bellingham, rising. "I'll give you full details at supper. We'll drive home in my brougham. No more motors for me!"

Harrison Elliott was waiting for them when they arrived at the flat in Hans Place. He greeted Adrian with some approach to geniality, and altogether appeared less wrapped up in himself than usual. Adrian put the change down to the improvement in the fortunes of "Whitehall." Over supper they discussed the play.

"I suppose our hostess has given you a gentle hint," said the dramatist, "of certain alterations we're making in the cast. You won't object to playing Mr. Deane's part, I suppose, if he decides to leave?"

"It won't be me who'll object. I'm not so sure of the audience, though."

"They'll be all right," declared Mrs. Bellingham. "If you play it as you did at rehearsal it will be quite a good performance."

"We tried Launcelot Keith in it," went on the other reflectively, "but he wasn't a great success. He's all right when it comes to carrying a flag, or shouting 'Long live the King!' but he doesn't seem capable of any higher flights."

"About this tour?" put in Mrs. Bellingham. "It was only definitely fixed up by Mr. Antony to-day. We open at Brighton on August Bank Holiday, and finish at Notting Hill in December. Both Mr. Hood and Miss Mortimer will go with us, and probably Miss Assheton as well. How does the idea of touring appeal to you, Mr. Merrick?"

It sounds very jolly!"

Harrison Elliott grinned.

"Lord! young man, you're the first actor I've ever heard say he thought touring jolly."

"What's the matter with it, then?"

"You'll find that out fast enough."

"Don't be so depressing," exclaimed Mrs. Bellingham. "Mr. Merrick will be cancelling his contract if you talk like this! Tell him about the alterations that are being made in the play."

The dramatist nodded, and began to discuss some fresh dialogue and incidents that he proposed to introduce. Adrian listened attentively, and gave his opinion when appealed to. It was received with a deference that he found quite flattering. Emboldened by this, he presently made a suggestion that had occurred to him some days earlier. It involved rather an important change in the construction, and he accordingly put it forward with considerable diffidence. He felt confident, however, that it would effect a great improvement in the interest of the piece as a whole.

When he had finished explaining his views, the dramatist and Mrs. Bellingham exchanged glances. Then the former turned to Adrian.

"Look here, young man," he said abruptly, "I don't want to flatter you unduly, but that's not half a bad idea of yours. I really think I'd like to use it."

Adrian flushed with pleasure.

"Pray do."

"You seem to have quite a sense of stage-craft," continued the other. "I don't think I'd be very far wrong if I said that you've tried your hand at a play already?"

"I've made one or two attempts, certainly."

"Well, make a few more, and they'll probably come to something before long. Now, Mrs. Bellingham, if you can bear a shock I'll say good night. I've got to do some work before I turn in."

As Harrison Elliott left the room Adrian would have followed his example, but Mrs. Bellingham detained him.

"Please don't go," she said softly. "You're not in such a hurry to leave me, are you? I want to talk to you about—well, about other things."

Adrian hesitated for a brief moment, but the invitation in her eyes was irresistible. Their liquid depths, and the caressing note of her voice, seemed to rob him of his free will entirely. She smiled as he met her glance, and her hand, straying over the back of a chair, rested on his. Its touch stirred him curiously.

"That's right," she said. "You look so nice when you're —er—amiable! Now, I've got a little present for you. I wonder if you'd care to have it, though?"

"Of course I should," he returned. "What is it?"

She rose and went to a bureau in the corner. Then she came back with a packet wrapped up in tissue paper.

"This," she said. "I'm afraid you'll think it very vain of me to imagine that you'd care for it—but somehow I have thought so. It only came to-day."

With a charming little gesture of deference she held out a panel portrait. It had been executed with admirable skill, and showed off her glorious beauty to its full perfection. The camera had caught something more than a likeness. In the eyes that looked out of the radiant face there was a glimpse of the woman behind. As he took in the face, point by point, and then glanced up at its subject and noted the strained intent expression with which she was regarding him, Adrian felt his pulses tingle. He laid the photograph down on the table.

"Well, how do you like it? Does it make me look a fright?"

"It—it's—charming," he answered simply.

Mrs. Bellingham gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Thank you. I'll sign it for you now. Shall I?"

"Please do."

She went to the table where he was sitting and drew a

silver inkstand towards her. Then, taking up a quill, she wrote across the lower portion of the photograph in a bold, flowing hand, "To Adrian Merrick from Grace Bellingham." As she leaned over him the pen dropped from her slim fingers, but she made no attempt to pick it up. Her hair brushed against his, and the *filet* of tiny diamonds that encircled its smooth coils sparkled before him. He could feel her warm breath on his ear—it seemed to come and go in little quick gasps, and he caught at his own. She turned her head slowly, and the perfume from the roses nestling in her bodice floated upwards. Her eyes met his. He could see into their still depths. The damask on her cheeks deepened. Her lips parted, and a whisper—as from somewhere a long way off—broke the silence that had settled down.

"*Adrian!*"

He started at the sound, half wondering if he had only imagined it. As he did so, the door opened and a maid appeared on the threshold. He would have risen from the table, but Mrs. Bellingham checked him with a gesture. She drew herself up and turned to the maid.

"Well, Mary," she said coldly, "what is it?"

"I beg your pardon, madam, but the hall porter wants to know if there are any letters for the last post?"

"Tell him not to trouble. Mr. Merrick will put them in the box for me. He is just going."

She held out her hand, as Adrian went towards the door.

"Good night."

Adrian drove back to Down Street, his brain busy with thoughts.

"I wonder what game she's playing?" he reflected uneasily, as he let himself in.

# XII

THERE was a matinée the next day. Adrian went down to the theatre earlier than usual, for he wanted to have a talk with Godfrey Deane.

He found him in the dressing-room, and plunged at once into the matter that Elliott had spoken of.

"I've just heard you're going to leave us," he remarked.

"Yes. Rough on the piece, isn't it? Who has been talking, though?"

"Mrs. Bellingham and the author told me about it last night. Why aren't you coming on the tour? It will be awfully jolly."

The other whistled derisively.

"Good Lord! Merrick. You call touring jolly, do you?"

"Why not? What's the matter with it? Elliott seemed a bit surprised when I said I'd like to go. Isn't touring pleasant, then?"

Deane put down the stick of grease paint he was playing with and looked his questioner in the face.

"No, my gifted young friend," he returned drily, "touring is not pleasant."

"I've known people who've said it is," protested Adrian.

"I dare say you have. Some people will say anything except their prayers. As a matter of fact, I've heard mummers say they like touring, too. Indeed, one often comes across actors who place their hands on their hearts and swear there's nothing they prefer to it. The blood of George Washington does not flow in their veins, though."

"Well, what's wrong with it?"

"Everything. Even in a decent company like ours, with a responsible management behind it, and visiting Number One towns only, touring is pretty rotten. It means living in one's portmanteau for weeks at a time; it means long and tiring journeys every Sunday to all sorts of horrible provincial towns; it means continual changing of lodgings; it means endless expense in the matter of cabs and tips; and it means being away from London and an increased difficulty in getting an engagement when one returns. That's what touring means as this company will tour. As to what it means where a second-rate company, playing in Number Two's or Smalls—well, it's something you won't care to experience twice. No, my dear chap, I've done all the touring I want to. Accordingly, now that I've got an offer to go to the St. George's, I shall take it."

"You're not very encouraging," remarked Adrian, feeling a little depressed.

"I can't be that and truthful as well."

After the manner in which they had parted only a few hours earlier, Adrian could not help feeling distinctly uneasy at the prospect of meeting Mrs. Bellingham again. Her attitude had puzzled him a good deal. But for the utter absurdity of it, he would almost have thought that she was deliberately laying herself out to attract him. Once or twice, however, the idea had come into his mind, but he had dismissed it instantly, ashamed of himself for having even entertained it.

It was Mrs. Bellingham herself who soon set his mind at rest.

As he went through the swing door leading from the dressing-room passage to the stage he saw her standing beside a piece of scenery. She nodded as he came up.

"Well, Mr. Merrick, you got back safely last night, then?"

"Yes, thank you."

"That's right," she returned carelessly. Then she went off to speak to Keene.

"H'm," thought Adrian to himself, as he took his place in

the wings, "you're not quite so conversational this afternoon."

Throughout the remainder of the evening she seemed rather to avoid him than otherwise, and the brief manner in which she replied when once or twice he spoke to her of his own accord was distinctly unflattering to his self-esteem. Evidently, she was paying him back in his own coin now. He felt a little piqued when he realized her attitude. It was one thing to hold back from somebody else's advances, but quite another to have his own repelled.

There was a good deal of excitement in the atmosphere when he went down to the theatre the next day, for an intimation had been posted on the notice board to the effect that "Whitehall" would be withdrawn in two weeks' time. After this date all engagements were to be regarded as at an end. The notice, however, went on to state that the piece would be sent on tour early in August, and that applications from members of the company desirous of going with it were to be made to the business manager at once.

"I hear that Godfrey Deane has decided not to tour," observed Launcelot Keith, "so I shall ask Antony for the part. After what that chap on 'Footlight Bits' said about me, he's practically bound to let me have it."

Aubrey Hood winked at Adrian, who was being made the recipient of these confidences.

"I fancy that Mr. Elliott will have something to do with selecting the cast," he observed.

"Well, if he doesn't choose me he'll only be standing in his own light," returned the other confidently. "And that's just the sort of thing these damned dramatists are always doing. It doesn't seem to occur to them that a man like myself, who happens to be a provincial favourite with an established reputation, would give the piece a chance. I shall write and tell him that if I accept the part I don't propose to play it on Deane's lines at all."

"Pray do," observed Hood blandly. "It will be interesting to hear what he has to say."

On the Saturday following, all doubts as to who was going and who was not were at an end, for the cast had been definitely fixed by Antony and Elliott between them. Those members of the company whose applications had been declined told every one else that they themselves had refused to go despite the frantic appeals of the management, and most of those selected explained that only a sense of personal regard for the author had induced them to accept his pressing invitation.

"These people make me tired," remarked Constance Assheton to Adrian, as they discussed the matter between the acts. "To hear some of them talk you'd think that everybody in London was clamouring for them, simply. Mr. Keith—now that he hasn't been asked to do so—pretends that he doesn't want to travel. He actually talks of going into management on his own account. As for me, I've decided to take Mrs. Bellingham's offer because it's the best one I've had. Even touring engagements don't grow on every tree, and poor actresses like myself have to be content with what we can get."

"But you're not a poor actress."

"How do you know that, Mr. Merrick?"

"Because I've seen what you can do."

"Thank you," she returned with a bright smile. "Now I must go. We meet to-morrow, don't we, for the river expedition?"

"Yes, Paddington, by the booking-office, 10.15. It's a bit early, I know."

"Never mind. I'll sit up for it."

Greatly to his delight, when Adrian looked out of the window to inspect the weather the next morning, the sun was shining brilliantly. It promised an enjoyable day, and made him feel at peace with the world. He sang cheerfully as he shaved, and went downstairs to breakfast in an excellent temper.

Marchmont was waiting for him at the station, his pockets bulging with Sunday papers. He looked at Adrian critically.

"I thought actors always wore patent leather boots with flannels," he remarked.

"That's only the famous ones," returned Adrian.

"You don't mean to say there are any of the other sort, then?"

"Only one or two. Now come along to the booking-office, my polite conversationalist, and meet Miss Assheton."

Constance appeared almost immediately. She was wearing a gown of pink muslin—a shade that suited her admirably, thought Adrian—and looked prettier than ever. There was a touch of colour in her cheeks, and her violet eyes sparkled with excitement. He could see that even so blasé an individual as Douglas Marchmont was favourably impressed.

"How do you do?" she said, shaking hands with him. "You're the celebrated critic, aren't you?"

"No," he returned, "I'm the other one."

Adrian laughed as he led the way to the train.

"We're fortunate in the weather, Miss Assheton," he observed.

"Yes, aren't we. It's simply perfect. My landlady, however, who is a most depressing woman, assured me that it would rain before I got back. She then gave me a copy of 'Lloyd's,' with a cheerful account in it of an accident on the river yesterday at the very place we're going to. She herself is spending a happy day in the Wandsworth cemetery."

When they reached the river and found their boat, Constance settled herself among the cushions in the stern and took the lines, while Marchmont, who announced his intention of playing a "thinking" part, lit a pipe and read the "Referee." Adrian, accordingly, was left to scull.

"It's a fair division of labour," announced Marchmont. "Miss Assheton steers, you row, and I read. Pull us down to the island. The tripper element won't be so conspicuous there."

The river was delightful, its placid surface unbroken by

more than the faintest ripple. The cool green of the tree-bordered lawns on either side that sloped down to the water's edge, the warm sunshine around them, and the blue cloudless sky overhead, made up a pleasant contrast to the artificial atmosphere of the theatre. As he took in the scene, its quiet peacefulness appealed to Adrian strongly, and he felt that he never wanted to see the inside of a theatre again. He heaved a sigh of satisfaction and glanced at Constance. There was a dreamy look in her violet eyes that told him she was pleased as well. She smiled when she saw him watching her.

"Isn't this nice?" she exclaimed enthusiastically, dipping one slim ungloved hand over the side and letting it play with the rippling current.

"Better than play-acting, eh, Miss Assheton?" called out Marchmont.

"Lots," she answered simply.

Adrian smiled in sympathy. He knew what was passing in her mind as clearly as though she had spoken it. Then he looked straight ahead. A crowded launch was bearing down upon them. From under the striped awning came the sounds of a concertina, which a short stout man in a large check suit was playing energetically to an admiring group.

"There seems to be a merry party of select trippers on board that tub," observed Marchmont, shading his eyes. "I wonder who the harmoniously inclined sportsman is? I fancy I've seen him before."

Adrian looked in the direction of the launch again. Something about the musician's figure appeared familiar.

"Why, it's Tommy Bedford!" he exclaimed suddenly. "He's our comedian at the Embankment, you know."

"I thought he was a funny man," returned Marchmont.

"He isn't bad in his line," observed Constance. "Only when he makes a joke on the stage he has an irritating habit of hitting it on the head with a hammer, as it were. One quite expects to hear him call out, 'This way to the joke!'"

"That's for fear the audience shouldn't notice it, I suppose?"

"Precisely," said Adrian.

"I can place him now," went on Marchmont reflectively. "He was at the Stage Club the other day when I was there. I remember wondering which fitted him worse—his clothes or his teeth."

As the boat came within hailing distance of the launch the comedian waved a flaming handkerchief towards them to attract their attention, and then held up a bottle of beer.

"Cheer-oh!" he shouted. "Port your helm and have a gargle with us."

Finding that this mode of address evoked no acknowledgment beyond a curt nod from Adrian, he pretended to be violently sea-sick. This was evidently regarded by his companions as a piece of exquisite humour, for a roar of laughter floated after them as they shot out into the centre of the stream. For some minutes Adrian rowed on in grim silence. He felt that Constance was annoyed at Bedford's vulgarity, and he could see, too, from the way in which his eyebrows were raised, that Marchmont was not favourably impressed by it, either.

Presently he found a quiet backwater which no one else appeared to have discovered. Pulling the boat up under some overhanging willows, he announced that it was time for luncheon. They decided that it would be pleasanter to picnic where they were than to patronize an hotel, and Marchmont volunteered to go off across the fields in search of a little river-side inn which he declared to be near at hand, and see what could be obtained. Adrian watched him disappear with a feeling of satisfaction. There were times when two were company and three a crowd, and this was one of them. He wanted to be alone with Constance, and no other opportunity of being so would be likely to arise all day.

He looked at her covertly, as she lowered her sunshade and turned her face to his. Against the green background of the trailing branches she made a charming picture. The delicate

pink and white of her cheeks harmonized with a great clump of dog roses that overhung the bank, and the glimpse that he caught of the fair hair that strayed under her hat was the colour of the field through which he could see Marchmont making his way. It reminded him of some lines he had read years ago:

*And the hair that lay along her back*
*Was yellow like ripe corn.*

She met his eyes and smiled.

"What are you thinking of?" she demanded.

"I'm thinking how nice your hair is."

"What would you say if I told you it came out of a shop?"

"I should say the shop was in fairyland."

She shook her head reprovingly, but she looked pleased all the same.

"Don't be silly."

Adrian lit a cigarette, his thoughts busy with all the things he would like to tell her if only he dared. Although he had plenty of self-confidence as a rule, he felt somehow that Miss Assheton would not appreciate it. He cast about in his mind for a safe subject to discuss, when she herself suddenly presented one.

"Do you know," she remarked, leaning forward among the cushions, "I'm beginning to wish that Mr. Marchmont would make haste and come back."

"And I," returned Adrian lazily, "hope that he will be a very long time in doing so."

Constance coloured a little. Then she laughed.

"Why?"

"Because this is so nice—at least, it is for me."

"And for me also," she answered gently. "The fact is, however, I'm prosaic enough to be very hungry."

"I'm glad it's only that," said Adrian in a tone of relief. "I was afraid I was boring you."

"You mustn't think that," she replied, and her voice told him it was no empty compliment, "because I'm enjoying

myself immensely. So you've quite decided to go on tour with us?" she continued in another tone. "Well, while the novelty lasts I think you'll find it an interesting experience."

"I don't fancy some of the towns on the list," remarked Adrian. "What about Blackpool?"

"It's rather suggestive all the year round of Margate in August. The natives are very proud of it, though. They call it the British Biarritz, and Mr. Sims writes delightful articles about it in the 'Referee.' By the way, who will you live with on tour?"

"Myself, of course."

"Naturally. What I mean, though, is, do you intend to share rooms with any one?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Mr. Hood asked me to dig with him, but I've declined."

Constance became suddenly thoughtful.

"I don't think," she said hesitatingly, "that you like Mr. Hood."

"Candidly, Miss Assheton, I don't."

"Why do you object to him?"

Adrian shrugged his shoulders.

"I really don't know, but I do. I must admit, though, that he's always very civil to me, and also that he's a remarkably clever actor. He told me that he's coming on the tour, provided he gets the terms he wants."

"There won't be any difficulty about that," remarked Constance thoughtfully. "Mr. Hood is one of those men who can get practically anything they want by merely asking for it."

"Quite so," said Adrian. He would have liked to add, "except decent breeding," but he felt that it would be better not to do so.

# XIII

TEN minutes later Marchmont rejoined them, accompanied by a small boy staggering under a hamper. He threw open the lid and displayed the contents proudly.

"Congratulate me, Miss Assheton, on my skill as a forager," he exclaimed, as he produced a cold chicken, a tongue, and a big basket of strawberries, together with a couple of bottles of hock and a lump of ice. "I had to talk like a Dutch uncle to the proprietor of the pub over there in order to get anything at all. He looked, too, as though he wanted the names of two respectable householders before he'd trust me with his knives and forks!"

"Why all this difficulty?" inquired Adrian, helping to spread the cloth. "Didn't they like the look of you?"

Marchmont grinned good-naturedly, and threw a lump of bread at his questioner.

"Well, it seems that there's a select party of mummers—I beg your pardon, Miss Assheton—I mean distinguished actors and actresses—lunching on the premises, and they've all got large appetites. I peeped into the dining-room to see them. There was no mistaking the footlights. The party included a lady, who was so generously enamelled that every time she smiled her face cracked. Then there was a comedian, who evidently thought he was still on the stage. I know he was a comedian, because when the landlord came in and said that the wagonette was ready, he replied, 'Tell it to sit down.' Roars of laughter. I wonder how these brilliant flashes occur to people?"

"I expect it's a gift," laughed Constance.

It was a very pleasant picnic, thought Adrian, as he leaned back lazily against a tree trunk and watched his two guests. He had never seen Constance Assheton so bright and cheerful before. Marchmont, too, was in the best of spirits, and was evidently bent on making himself agreeable. He could be a delightful companion when he chose, and although he had a caustic tongue, he nevertheless kept it in order. At first Adrian had been rather afraid lest he should annoy Miss Assheton by his unflattering comments respecting the members of her profession, but it was obvious that she herself had no very exalted opinion of these. She laughed frankly at his strictures on the stage, and seemed, indeed, to agree with most of them.

"I must say I thoroughly enjoy reading your candid criticisms in the 'Herald,'" she observed. "After all the gush one comes across in other papers they are quite a tonic."

Marchmont impaled a strawberry on a fork.

"That's very charming of you," he remarked. "I'm afraid they haven't that effect on most people, though. My editor, for example, has just intimated that he will not require my valuable services after this day month."

"Why?" inquired Adrian, to whom this was news.

"I fancy it must be because I set too high a standard and make other people jealous. The only alternative I can think of is that the proprietor wants to pitchfork his son into the berth. The bright youth in question has just come down from Oxford, and announced that he would like to 'do' the theatres. Accordingly, he has been understudying me for the last three weeks. I doubt if he will be quite a success, though. He was sent over to Paris a few days ago to write a notice of Bernhardt in 'Hamlet,' and finished up by telegraphing a synopsis of the plot. One appreciates journalistic enterprise, of course. Still, it oughtn't to be pushed too far."

Presently Adrian announced that it was time to be moving on again. The small boy, who had been mounting sentry

over the hamper, was called to assist in packing up, and made happy with the remnants of the feast. Marchmont volunteered to take a spell at the oars, an offer which the others heartily approved.

"How beautiful that looks!" observed Constance, pointing to a big flower-laden houseboat moored to the bank about a quarter of a mile ahead. "I wonder who it belongs to?"

"Some shining lights of the Smart Set, I suppose," remarked Marchmont indifferently. "I'll put on a spurt and we'll be there in a few minutes."

He bent his back to the oars with such effect that they were very soon almost alongside the houseboat. A startled exclamation from Constance as they came abreast of it made Adrian look up quickly. Among the crowd of people sitting in deck chairs on the roof he saw a woman rise suddenly and step forward. She lowered a sunshade of billowy chiffon, and revealed herself as Mrs. Bellingham. A momentary expression of surprise shot across her face as she stared down into the passing boat and recognized the figure in the stern. Then it disappeared as swiftly as it had formed, and, wreathed in smiles, she waved a hand towards Adrian.

"Good afternoon," she called out. "You look very comfortable, Mr. Merrick."

"Thank you, I am," he returned.

"Wasn't that Mrs. Bellingham?" asked Marchmont, as soon as they were out of hearing again.

"Yes."

"I wonder why she scowled so unpleasantly when she saw me? All her smiles were reserved for you."

"I fancy it was me she scowled at," remarked Constance in rather a troubled tone.

"Why?" demanded Adrian quickly. The idea had struck him too, but he had tried to think he was mistaken.

"Well, the fact is, Mrs. Bellingham and I don't get on very well together. She is a lady who is apt to take rather violent likes and dislikes."

"And you are one of the dislikes, Miss Assheton?" observed Marchmont.

"I'm afraid so."

"What a shame!" burst out Adrian.

"It doesn't matter," she put in hastily. "I dare say it's all my fancy, too. Mrs. Bellingham is not very approachable, you know—at least, not where her own sex are concerned."

They parted at Paddington, for Constance resolutely declined to let Adrian drive her back to her rooms.

"It's very nice of you to say that you have to go along the Kennington Road to get to Piccadilly," she remarked, "but I fancy the Park Lane route is more direct. Thanks very much for the offer, all the same. I've had a delightful day."

Adrian drove off to his rooms with Marchmont. At first he was rather silent, for the memory of Constance's troubled face when she had seen Mrs. Bellingham oppressed him.

"Well, what do you think of Miss Assheton?" he demanded after a pause.

"I think she's charming, and refreshingly different from the great majority of her illustrious calling."

"In what way?"

Marchmont became suddenly meditative.

"In lots. To begin with, she didn't say, 'Pleased to meet you,' as have all the actresses I've ever been introduced to—especially those who live in the neighbourhood of the Kennington Road. Then there's an agreeable reticence about your friend, and this is a trait that's quite unusual—at least, in my experience. So far, all the actresses I've come across have invariably been so terribly anxious to confide in me. Before I've known the dear creatures five minutes, they want to tell me all about their dreadful pasts."

Adrian made no reply, but digested the information thoughtfully.

When he saw her at the theatre the next evening, Mrs. Bellingham made a reference to the previous day's expedition.

"Miss Assheton tells me that you and your friend gave her a very pleasant time of it on the river yesterday," she remarked. "Certainly, you all appeared very cheerful when you passed my houseboat. I do think you might have invited me, though——"

Adrian looked up quickly.

"Why, would you have come?"

"It's quite possible—that is, if you had asked me very nicely."

"I wish I had, then."

Mrs. Bellingham laughed and held out her hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick. You said that charmingly. I feel quite flattered."

Later on in the evening he had a word or two with Constance. He was glad to see that she had quite recovered her usual good spirits, but he felt vaguely that he would have been better pleased if it were any one but Aubrey Hood whom he saw at her side. He wondered how much of her animation was due to the leading man's society.

She came across the stage to where he was standing.

"I got back quite safely last night," she said. "My landlady, Mrs. Waggett, seemed a little disappointed. After her gloomy predictions, I fancy it would have pleased her if I had been brought back a drowned corpse on a stretcher!"

"She must be a cheerful old party to live with."

"Oh, we get on very well together. Most theatrical landladies, though, are terrors."

A few days later the shadows of coming events began to manifest themselves. The "last nights" of "Whitehall" were announced, and would-be patrons who had hitherto held aloof recognized at length the advisability of seeing the piece, while every actor and actress who happened to be disengaged at the time promptly applied for free seats. The audiences, indeed, assumed such respectable dimensions that Adrian found it difficult to see any good reason for withdrawing the piece. He remarked upon the crowded

appearance of the house to Miss Mortimer one evening, but that authority took a very different view of the situation.

"Bless you," she returned condescendingly, "but it's nearly all paper. Quite half these people are pro's, and have come in on their faces—or their visiting cards—and a lot of the others are deadheads as well. Antony won't let any one in the company have a free seat, but he gives 'em away right and left to any one who comes up to the box-office and presents a pasteboard. Beastly mean of him, I call it."

He was sent for at the end of the week by the business manager to receive his contract, for the original one expired with the termination of the London season. Antony had not been much in evidence behind the scenes lately, and whenever he had shown himself there it had merely been for the purpose of having a hurried conference with Mrs. Bellingham or Felix Keene. For the rest of the day he seemed to shut himself up in his office, emerging therefrom only at rare intervals. Most of the company wished he would stop there altogether, for the stress of work did not exercise a soothing effect upon his temper.

"He's an ill-bred hooligan," announced Miss Warren confidentially to Adrian. "When I met him in the foyer this morning and said it was a fine day, he said he had no time to talk about the weather."

As he entered the office, Adrian found its occupant apparently up to his eyes in work. The desk at which he sat was covered with papers, and a shallow basketful of letters had overflowed on to the floor. Others were scattered about on chairs, and a pile that were being dealt with when he came into the room rested at the manager's elbow. Adrian noticed that most of these were unceremoniously thrown into a yawning waste-paper basket as soon as the first few lines of their contents had been mastered.

Antony, who was smoking a cigarette in a long amber tube, swept the heap of correspondence before him together with an exclamation of impatience and turned to his visitor.

"Sit down," he said curtly, "if you can find a seat. You can chuck those letters on the floor. I'm not going to answer 'em. They're only from people writing in for parts for the tour. I really believe that every mummer in the kingdom who happens to be out of a shop imagines he or she can get one here for the asking. One man thinks it necessary to tell me he's a 'poor actor'—just as though I couldn't find that out for myself. Well, here's your contract, Mr. Merrick. Sign it, and let me have it again this evening."

"I might as well do it now," said Adrian, taking up a pen.

Antony gave his unpleasant laugh.

"Just as you please. It's not a bad working rule, though to read a contract through first."

"Oh, I'm sure this is all right," returned Adrian, signing his name at the foot. He wanted to get the interview over as quickly as possible.

"It's quite refreshing," observed the other, as he put the document away in one of the drawers of the desk, "to come across an actor who doesn't regard a manager as his natural enemy."

As he was leaving the theatre after the performance that night he met Launcelot Keith going out at the same time. During the last day or two it had struck him that this particular member of the company was rather cultivating his society. The attitude of superiority he had assumed during the commencement of their acquaintance was no longer apparent. The one of excessive friendliness, however, which had succeeded it did not please Adrian much more. Still, as he always liked to be on good terms with every one, he had responded to it as far as possible.

"Are you going my way?" he inquired. "If so, we might walk up to Piccadilly together. It's a fine night, and the exercise will do us good."

"I was just going to propose it," returned Keith. "My rooms are in South Kensington, so I shall pass yours on the way."

They walked along in silence for a few minutes. To

Adrian it seemed that his companion was not entirely at ease. Several times, for example, he seemed on the verge of making a remark, and would then break off suddenly, apparently fully occupied by the effort of keeping alight an American cigarette. At last, however, he found his voice.

"I say, Merrick," he began nervously, "I—er—wish you'd come into my club with me for a moment. We might have a drink there, you know, and I—er—rather want to talk to you about something."

"All right," said Adrian briskly. "Lead on, Macduff!"

The other's pale face cleared visibly.

"Thanks awfully," he returned. "I think you'd like to see the club, too."

Mr. Keith belonged to the Cowslip Club. It was a mushroom organization, with premises in a side street off Piccadilly, but the youth always spoke of it in a tone of awe, as though it were the Athenæum at least. According to the prospectus, membership was confined to "noblemen and gentlemen connected with Literature, Music, and Art, the Learned Professions, and the Naval and Military Services," but by common report the election committee did not insist very rigorously upon these qualifications. There was a rumour, indeed, that eligibility for membership depended solely upon ability to pay the annual subscription, and that candidates were proposed by the hall-porter and seconded by the head-waiter, the election taking place on the doormat. The club was a proprietary one, a fact which manifestly had a good deal to do with the lack of exclusiveness about it.

The secretary, a rotund and cheery-looking individual, wearing a dinner jacket and carpet slippers, appeared to be on guard just inside the swing doors leading from the entrance-hall to the reading-room. He smiled affably at every one who came in, and agreed in a most cordial manner with the remarks they made to him. In the space of five minutes Adrian heard him acquiesce in the opinion that it

was warm, that it was cold, that it looked like rain, that the fine weather had evidently set in, and that London was very full, and that London was very empty.

While his host endeavoured to attract the attention of a waiter who was having a confidential chat with a slightly inebriated young gentleman, the details of which seemed to consist principally of the private lives of popular actresses, Adrian glanced round the room. It was furnished in a style that he had no difficulty in recognizing as Early Tottenham Court Road. The members, too, appeared as though they hailed from Bloomsbury rather than Belgravia. One of those present he had seen behind the counter at the Stores that afternoon, while another bore a suspicious resemblance to the manager of the restaurant where he had lunched on the day when he first met Constance Assheton. An elderly gentleman with a bloated red face snored loudly on a sofa, while a little group, whose predatory noses betrayed their race, discussed shady financial schemes in an alcove.

Over the whisky and soda he had ordered Adrian's companion became communicative.

"You ought to join us, Merrick," he said, in a patronizing tone. "We've a very good set of members here."

"I'm afraid I'm not eligible," returned Adrian blandly, suppressing an inclination to laugh.

"Oh, well, a word from me to the secretary would probably get over that difficulty. Of course, the club is exclusive, but if you were backed up by me you might be elected all right. At any rate, you'd stand a good chance."

"Thanks very much. I must think it over. What was it you wanted to talk to me about, though?"

Mr. Keith sought inspiration in his whisky. He seemed scarcely at ease. After a moment's pause, however, he looked up, an expression of mingled shyness and cunning on his face.

"Well," he began nervously, "it's about this tour."

"Yes?"

"I'm not going on it."

"Indeed! Why not? Surely you were asked to do so?"

"No—er—that's just it. That swine Antony has persuaded Elliott—who's a conceited ape if ever there was one—to tell Mrs. Bellingham that some one else ought to have the part. Of course, it sounds very absurd, but it's what happened, all the same. When I went to ask Antony for my touring contract yesterday he said there wasn't one for me. What do you think of that?"

"Of course it's unfortunate," observed Adrian diplomatically; "but surely with your—er—reputation—you won't have any difficulty in securing a London engagement instead?"

"One would think so, certainly," replied the other with a complacent smirk. "Still, there's so much professional jealousy about that it's not an easy matter—even for a man with a reputation like myself—to find something to suit him. Yesterday I went to see Eliot Archdale, who manages the Regency. He was very civil, but he said he had no vacancy for a leading man."

"Indeed!" returned Adrian gravely. "I suppose you wouldn't take anything else?"

Keith shifted about in his chair uneasily.

"Well, I oughtn't to. I don't mind telling you in strict confidence, though, that I *was* prepared to accept—well—er—a minor part temporarily. However, Archdale didn't offer it."

"I see. What is it you want me to do for you? I'm afraid I don't know any one who can be of assistance."

Keith leaned forward and sank his voice confidentially.

"Oh, yes, you do. I've been thinking matters over, and I've decided to go on this 'Whitehall' tour—only until something else turns up, you understand."

"Quite so. But where do I come in?"

"Here. I want you to put in a word for me to Mrs. Bellingham."

Adrian started in surprise. The nature of the request was more remarkable than he had anticipated.

"Mrs. Bellingham! What interest have I in that quarter?"

"Plenty—if you choose to exert it," was the cool reply. "Look here, you know as well as I do that you can twist Mrs. Bellingham round your little finger. It's common talk among the company. Come, what do you say?"

"I say that I'll see you damned first! It's like your infernal impertinence to suggest it."

An evil gleam shot into the other's face. With an effort, however, he controlled himself and made a fresh attempt.

"Don't take it like that, Merrick," he said with an awkward laugh. "It's not much I'm asking you to do. All I want is to have my name mentioned to Mrs. Bellingham. I have no influence in that quarter, but she'll listen to you."

Adrian relented a little. Keith's anxiety was too apparent. Still, he felt that the request was quite impossible, and it angered him that it should even have been made.

"I'm sorry," he said, as he rose to go, "but I can't do as you ask."

"You mean you won't?"

Adrian shrugged his shoulders indifferently. It was getting late, and he had no desire to prolong the conversation.

"Take it that way if you like. I'm off now. Good night."

# XIV

ADRIAN left the Cowslip Club and walked back to his rooms feeling extremely angry. He calmed down a little by the time he reached the Green Park, although he was still anything but well disposed towards his late companion. Launcelot Keith's remarks about Mrs. Bellingham's alleged interest in himself struck him as an impertinence that called for something more than mere remonstrance. That he should have dared to make such statements at all was amazing; still, he could have overlooked that, ascribing it to a freak of imagination. But the contention that the matter was attracting general notice was another thing altogether. At first he tried to dismiss it from his mind, with the reflection that it had been born entirely of the whisky and soda of which its originator had so freely partaken. With nothing else in his head to keep it company, the idea had probably expanded there until now he actually came to believe in it.

Although he told himself that the whole thing was absurd and not worth troubling about, he felt a little disturbed, nevertheless. As for the private opinion of a conceited youngster like Launcelot Keith he did not care in the least. That curious individual was quite welcome to hold whatever views he pleased. With regard to the remainder of the company, well, they too could do the same, with of course the exception of Constance Assheton. He would not like Constance to have a wrong impression of him. That she might possibly do so was intolerable. Now that there was a chance of losing it, he realized that her good opinion meant a great deal.

When he saw him again at the theatre the next evening, Launcelot Keith appeared quite undisturbed by any memory of the manner in which they had parted at the Cowslip Club. He went up to Adrian, indeed, as though they were the best of friends, and absolutely declined to be shaken off. His present affability was scarcely less trying than his previous impertinence.

"I won't trouble you further, my dear fellow, in the little matter we discussed last night," he observed airily. "The fact is, I've fixed up something on my own account now. I knew that I should have an offer as soon as it got about that I was disengaged."

"I congratulate you. What are you going to do—start in management on your own account?"

Keith smirked, and ran his fingers through his long hair with a theatrical gesture.

"Well, I might do that before very long. Just now, though, I'm going out with Bennett's Shakespearean Repertoire Company—Romeo and Juliet, Twelfth Night, and Macbeth. We open at Bradford the second week in August."

"Romeo should suit you," observed Adrian politely, wondering at the same time what mysterious influence had been brought to bear on the management of the company in question.

"Yes, I fancy I shall be able to introduce a new reading of the part," was the complacent rejoinder.

Later on, in his dressing-room, Adrian mentioned the matter to Godfrey Deane. It was received with incredulous laughter.

"Good Lord! Merrick. You don't mean to say you swallowed that conceited young bounder's story about his being engaged to play lead? Why, I got him the shop myself, and have seen his contract. He's no more cast for Romeo than I am."

"Well, it seemed a little startling, certainly. Still, he was so cocksure about it."

"As a matter of fact, he's one of the attendants, and understudies the Apothecary. In Twelfth Night and Macbeth he's Fabian and Lenox. The posturing young ape hasn't got ten lines in the three plays put together. For all this, though, he's walking about London telling every one that he's Bennett's new leading man."

"Well, if he doesn't do that," returned Adrian, taking up a stick of grease paint, "I doubt if anybody else will. By the way, who is the trusting Bennett?"

"Sam Bennett? Oh, I thought every one knew him! He's quite a theatrical institution. For the last twenty years or so he's been running a troupe of barnstormers, chiefly composed of ambitious young men and women who don't mind paying stiff premiums for the privilege of inflicting their conceptions of Hamlet and Ophelia on country audiences. Sam is by way of being a gentleman—at any rate, he was at Oxford in the dark ages—and is quite the worst actor who ever murdered a part. He has a huge following in the provinces, though, and confiding parents think themselves uncommonly lucky if he will take charge of their stage-struck boys and girls. They have an idea, you know, that he looks after them so nicely. To give him his due, he certainly does this. He travels, for example, with a chaplain, and there used to be a clause in his contracts that the members of the company should attend church on Sunday evenings. He always reads the lessons himself; and he's a great chap, too, for opening bazaars. Oh, Sam Bennett has his head screwed on very tightly, I can tell you!"

The final performance of "Whitehall" took place at the end of the following week. Adrian was a little surprised to see that there was no ceremony of any sort marking the occasion. When the curtain fell the company separated as usual, just as though they were all going to meet again the next night. He scarcely knew quite what he had anticipated, but it was undoubtedly something different from this. Certainly, he had frequently read highly circumstantial accounts of

farewell suppers behind the scenes, the articles being illustrated, too, with photographs of leading actors and actresses.

"Well, you can't expect us to give ourselves up to wild revelry," observed Miss Mortimer. "The last night of a piece isn't exactly an occasion for rejoicing."

As he had some packing to do he was rather late in leaving his dressing-room. When he had finished, he went downstairs to have a last look at the stage. It was almost in darkness, for the iron safety curtain had been lowered, and only a single row of lights glimmered feebly in their wire casing over the proscenium. With all the scenery struck and stowed away against the walls in the space under the flies, the stage seemed curiously big and bare and desolate. It was difficult to associate it with the brilliancy and movement that had been in evidence there but a short half-hour before.

Standing beside the switchboard, and thinking of the eventful six weeks he had spent in the theatre, the sound of a footstep presently broke upon his ears. Some one was coming down the wings towards him. For the moment he thought it was the night watchman. Suddenly he heard his name called softly, and he turned round in surprise. As he did so, he saw Mrs. Bellingham.

"Well, Mr. Merrick," she exclaimed, "taking a last look at the scene of your triumphs, eh? How nice of you! Most of these ungrateful people went off as fast as they could. But then, one mustn't expect gratitude in the theatrical profession."

"I hope you don't consider me ungrateful," said Adrian slowly.

"No, I don't think you'll give me occasion to do that."

She moved a step nearer and held out her hand as she spoke. A faint perfume of violets clung to the long white glove that covered it. The soft palm lingered in his with a gentle pressure. He peered into her face, and noticed that it appeared strangely white and drawn. In the semi-darkness he could not distinguish her features plainly, but

her eyes seemed to burn him. Their velvet depths glowed intensely, and held him as with steel chains. The lace wrap slipped from her shoulders and left them white and gleaming. He bent down and picked it up.

"Thank you," she said gently. "Please put it on for me."

His hands trembled a little as he adjusted the folds. An expression of pleased triumph crept into the wearer's eyes, and a half smile played round the upturned lips. There was something suggestive of the serpent in it that put Adrian instinctively on his guard. With an effort he pulled himself together. Mrs. Bellingham, however, appeared supremely unconscious of what was passing in his mind, and the confident smile deepened.

"Well, are you sorry to leave the old Embankment, Mr. Merrick?"

"On the whole, I am."

"It's nice of you to say that. I've tried to make your time here a pleasant one. Have I really succeeded?"

"Indeed you have."

Mrs. Bellingham sighed plaintively.

"Thank you," she returned softly. "I wanted you to carry away a pleasant memory of Grace Bellingham. I should like to give you a little memento of our association here. May I?"

"I assure you I don't want anything," began Adrian nervously.

The other fumbled at her bodice and detached a spray of roses and maidenhair. She unwound the confining wire rapidly and separated a single bud.

"Well, you won't refuse this, at any rate. Come, let me put it into your buttonhole for you."

He bent forward, as the other, with a smile of triumph, placed her hand on his coat collar and glanced up into his face. Their eyes met, and as they did so Adrian half unconsciously caught at his breath. Something that he saw in the woman's expression seemed to deprive him of his self-control. All that he knew was that he was alone with Mrs.

Bellingham, and that she was very beautiful. This was enough for him.

Instinctively he felt for her hands as they dropped. The slim fingers closed over his and then tightened. His elbow knocked against the switchboard and rested on a projection. Not quite realising the consequences, he pressed against it. Instantly the row of lights feebly glimmering along the top of the curtain flickered and went out. The next moment an impenetrable darkness settled down.

Mrs. Bellingham gave a little cry of alarm, and stretched out her hands appealingly.

"Adrian—Mr. Merrick!" she exclaimed. "What on earth has happened?"

"It's all right—nothing to be disturbed about," he returned, feeling for the switches. "I touched something with my elbow a moment ago and apparently shut off the circuit. Ah, here we are," he added, as he pressed a second projection and flooded the whole stage with a sudden blaze of light. "That's better, eh?"

The iron pass door on the opposite side of the proscenium opened, and some one carrying a lantern came through the wings. It was the fireman going his rounds. He looked up in surprise when he saw his employer, and stared doubtfully from her to Adrian.

Mrs. Bellingham recovered herself at once.

"Good evening, Parker," she said with a careless nod. "Just having a last look round, I suppose?"

The fireman saluted respectfully.

"Yes, madam. I thought I heard voices here, so I came along to see who it was."

Mrs. Bellingham smiled pleasantly.

"Quite right. I'm glad to find you keeping such a sharp look out. Mr. Merrick and I have been trying some experiments with the electric light. By the way, do you happen to know if my brougham has arrived yet?"

"Yes, madam, it's waiting at the stage door."

She turned to Adrian, and held out her hand.

"Well, good night," she said, in a perfectly tranquil tone. "I must be going now. Don't forget to be here for rehearsal this day three weeks."

Adrian took a cab back to his rooms, feeling that he had had rather a narrow escape from taking a step that he would have regretted afterwards. Mrs. Bellingham was a beautiful woman, and a very charming one. Still, he thought that, on the whole, he preferred her at a distance.

It was with the object of securing this that he resolved to spend his brief holiday abroad. There were just three weeks before the rehearsals commenced. Neither Ostend nor Trouville appealed to him. Both places were too much like London over again, and he would probably meet in them all the people he knew and wished to avoid. The sea, too, had few charms for him. He wanted green fields and waving trees.

Douglas Marchmont, whom he consulted on the subject, proved singularly helpful.

"Look here, young Garrick," he remarked, glancing up from a pile of papers, "I'm at a loose end myself just now. How does this strike you? It's an advertisement. I think it's rather alluring—'Cheap Trips to the Taunus. Fourteen Happy Days in Homburg (Personally Conducted), Fourteen Pounds. No Extras.' Are you on?"

Adrian shook his head.

"No, I'm not. I don't like cheap trips, and I don't fancy personally conducted tours. Once, during my dreadful past, I tried one, and did ten days in Rome for ten guineas. The expedition was organized by an enterprising clergyman, and the party was made up of the most appalling people imaginable. Lectures in the Forum were included among the other revels. In fact, we quite went the pace! All the same, I very soon got tired of it."

"Yes, that sort of thing doesn't sound wildly entertaining. I tell you what, though—we might go to Homburg on our own account. It's a delightful place."

Adrian looked a little doubtful.

"But the season hasn't begun yet," he protested. "No one goes there until August."

"Make your mind easy about that," laughed the other. "The season will commence when I arrive. Now, this is my programme: we'll go from Blackwall to Rotterdam, and then by train to Cologne. If we don't die of the smells there, we'll take a Rhine steamer to Mayence, stop in Wiesbaden a few days, and then on to Homburg. How does that strike you?"

"Now you're talking," returned Adrian. "We'll start to-morrow."

# XV

THE expedition proved quite a success, and Marchmont from the first displayed unsuspected qualities as guide and travelling companion. He knew both the country and the language thoroughly, and showed the other how to get the best results out of either with the least expenditure of money and time. From the moment when he stepped off the steamer on to the Boompjes Quay at Rotterdam, Adrian felt his spirits revive. He wanted to remain in the sleepy old town indefinitely and explore the whole place. Marchmont, however, would not listen to the project, and hurried him off to the railway station as soon as they had breakfasted.

"If we don't make haste," he declared, "Homburg will be filled with trippers before we get near it. There's a rumour in the 'Zeitung' that a Polytechnic excursion has already started from Regent Street. Its arrival here is threatened hourly."

Adrian found the tide of life to flow very pleasantly in Homburg. They took rooms in the long tree-bordered avenue skirting the edge of the Friedrichstrasse, and spent as much time as possible in the open air. A visit to the Elisabethbrunnen before breakfast made an appropriate commencement of the day, while dinner on the flower-bordered terrace of the Kurhaus, with an orchestral concert to follow, wound it up. The weather was perfect, and existence appeared almost idyllic. In the cool green of the leafy Curpark, when the evening meal was over and the coffee and cigar stage had been reached, and the lights and laughter were dying down, London seemed very far away. He almost felt as though he never wanted to see it again.

Marchmont, smoking tranquilly beside him and skimming through a German paper, divined his thoughts instinctively.

"Fancy chucking all this deliberately," he observed, "in order to paint one's face and caper about on a stage for the edification of any one who buys a seat! It's rather a feeble sort of thing to do, isn't it?"

Adrian felt it was time to stand up for his own profession.

"What about yourself?" he protested. "When it comes to the push, I don't know that writing twopenny-halfpenny articles on any subject you're told to is much more dignified."

Marchmont, however, refused to be drawn.

"I dare say not," he returned equably. "Only you must remember that though journalists talk a vast amount of nonsense, they never talk about their precious art."

"That's because they haven't any."

"Very likely. We'll leave it at that, at any rate. You gifted actors are queer people. The entire absence of a sense of the fitness of things you display at times is really remarkable. To give you an instance, I went to a rehearsal at a suburban theatre the other day. The piece was a lurid melodrama, with a thunderstorm for its great scene. When the clouds clapped together the engaging young hero had to put his hand on his honest heart and say, 'Hark! I hear the voice of God!' Well, the fellow with the tin tray in the wings gave the cue all right, but, at the critical moment, I'm hanged if the other didn't forget his lines. After an awful pause, on rushed the stage manager. 'Now then, Mr. Jones,' he bellowed, 'where's the voice of God? Let's have it, please.' When I laughed, he looked quite annoyed."

Adrian smiled.

"I fancy I'd have laughed, too," he returned.

Marchmont lit a cigar reflectively.

"Now I think it's high time we went off," he observed. "I don't want to cast a gloom over the proceedings, but there's a young *madchen* over there by the band who has been casting sheep's eyes at you for the last half-hour, besides making remarks about your personal appearance that would bring a blush to your innocent cheeks if only you knew the language."

At the end of a week Marchmont announced that it was

time to return home. Adrian left Homburg with regret. He would have readily stopped there a couple of months, but he realized that this was quite impossible. There were many things requiring attention in London. The rehearsals for the tour, too, began in a few days, and these alone would keep him busy. He did not look forward particularly to renewing his acquaintance with the members of the company, always excepting Constance Assheton. She was different from everybody else. He scarcely dared acknowledge to himself how much he wanted to see her again.

There were several letters waiting for him when he got back to his rooms in Down Street. One, from Felix Keene, was a semi-official communication notifying him to attend a rehearsal on the following Monday. The rest of his correspondence looked uninteresting. It comprised a few bills, a couple of appeals for a subscription to a theatrical charity, and a circular from a money-lender's tout so artfully worded that he had to read it through twice before he appreciated its meaning, so cleverly was it wrapped up in flowery generalities. He gathered up the bundle and was about to throw it unceremoniously into the waste-paper basket, when he caught sight of a hitherto unopened envelope. The writing seemed vaguely familiar, but for the moment he could not identify the sprawling feminine hand. Opening it hastily, he turned to the signature. It was that of Mrs. Bellingham.

"Now, what the deuce has she got to say?" he asked himself, as he ran rapidly over the contents. The next moment all doubts were set aside.

DEAR MR. MERRICK,

Where have you been hiding yourself? If you can spare me an hour, will you come and lunch with me in Hans Mansions on Sunday next, at two o'clock? Mr. Harrison Elliott is coming, and we both want to talk to you about the alterations in 'Whitehall.' By the way, he would like you to send him your ideas on the subject at once.

Yours very sincerely,

GRACE BELLINGHAM.

The invitation was two days old. He dashed off a note of acceptance and dispatched it by a boy messenger. The remark about Elliott was eminently satisfactory. He had been rather afraid that the eminent dramatist had been joking when he suggested entrusting the rewriting of the play to himself. It was now, however, apparent that he meant business. The thought was stimulating.

Immediately after dinner that evening Adrian set to work in earnest. Elliott's promise to read anything he cared to send him was encouraging, and now that the chance offered he intended to hold him to his word. From a boxful of manuscripts—some completed, and some amounting to little more than bare scenarios—he selected a four-act comedy. When writing it, a year earlier, he had entertained great hopes of it, for he felt that the main idea was distinctly good. Looked at in the light of his recent stage experience, however, he realized with something like a shock that it was not a very brilliant effort after all.

"Good Lord! I didn't know it was as bad as this," he exclaimed ruefully when he came to the last page. "I daren't send it in this state to Elliott. He'd tell me to rewrite the first three acts and cut out the fourth."

He put the comedy back in its big square envelope and took up another packet. It was a little one-act play to which he had given the title of "Fancy Free." The story was a simple enough one—neither of the two women in it had a "past" of any description, and the other characters were quite ordinary individuals—but the writing of it had pleased him. On the voyage home from the Cape he had shown it to a girl on board the ship, and he remembered that she had been enthusiastic about it. She was returning with a theatrical company which had been touring in South Africa, and Adrian had consequently put a good deal of faith in her judgment. At his request, the manager of the company—an affable individual, who looked like a cross between an operatic tenor and a sporting journalist, with a strong touch of Vincent Crummles—read it afterwards. His report,

however, was not so encouraging. "No money in it, dear boy," he declared. "A pretty enough little thing, but not what's wanted for the boards.

"Why, I give you my word," he remarked in a tone that was evidently meant to clinch the argument, "even I wouldn't be much good in such a part. You can see for yourself, then, that there's no chance for the play with any one else."

But the hopeful author thought otherwise. He felt that there was something in "Fancy Free" after all, and that, given capable actors and actresses, the piece was, at any rate, better than the ordinary run of curtain-raisers. After a little consideration he decided to send it to Elliott, although he would have liked to have something more ambitious to submit as an initial venture.

Marchmont came round to see him the next afternoon. He found his friend busy over the second copy of the proposed alterations in "Whitehall." As he looked over the sheets of manuscript, he noted with a smile that the principal amendments appeared to be in Miss Assheton's part, the whole of which had been considerably strengthened. Most of the dialogue had been rewritten completely, and a fresh scene for Adrian and herself was dovetailed into it.

Adrian watched him anxiously as he put the sheets back on the table.

"For goodness sake, say something!" he exclaimed.

Marchmont smiled inscrutably.

"Whaur's your Wully Shakespeare noo?" he demanded at last.

Adrian beamed with pleasure.

"Is it all right, then?"

"Jolly fine. If I might make a suggestion, though——"

"Yes?"

"You ought to restore the two pages which you've cut out of Mrs. Bellingham's part and give her a bit more as well."

The proud author looked a little disappointed.

"But she's already got as much as she can do," he protested.

Marchmont shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I'm only an amateur in these matters, but I've never known any leading lady complain that her part was too long. I rather doubt if this one will prove an exception."

"Well, I'll chance it, at any rate," returned Adrian lightly, as he gathered up the pages and slipped them into a large envelope. "Harrison Elliott has undertaken to read my effort, and as I've proceeded more or less on the lines I've already discussed with him, I think it ought to do."

When he had sent off the manuscript to its destination he could not help feeling a little anxious. So much depended on his experiment. If Elliott approved the work there was no knowing to what it might not lead. It was as likely as not that Mrs. Bellingham might even give him a commission for a play. He had no doubts as to his ability to write one, for his brain teemed with ideas.

"It's easy enough to write a play," observed Marchmont, as they discussed the subject. "Any one can do that much. The difficulty comes in at a later stage in the proceedings."

"What do you mean?"

"Getting some one to read it."

"Well, I'm all right so far as that goes."

Marchmont laughed.

"Yes, you've a friend at court. If you're wise you'll make the most of her."

Adrian looked up quickly.

"I suppose you mean Mrs. Bellingham?"

"Precisely."

"Rot!"

"As you please," returned Marchmont equably.

# XVI

ON the following Sunday, Adrian went to the flat in Hans Mansions with rather mixed feelings. He wanted to see Mrs. Bellingham, but at the same time it annoyed him to think that people should imagine the intimacy between them to be anything more than a friendly one. In his new frame of mind he now noted trifles that had hitherto escaped him, and the flicker of a smile on the butler's sleek face as he was shown into the drawing-room did not tend to exert a soothing influence.

"That overfed rascal looks as though he thought something was up," he reflected angrily.

He was kicking his heels about impatiently and wishing that some one would appear, when the door opened and Mrs. Bellingham stood framed in the threshold. At the smile of welcome with which she greeted him Adrian felt his resentment die away, and he smiled in turn.

"That's better," she exclaimed, shaking hands. "You've no idea how savage you were looking a moment ago. I began to wonder what I'd done to fall into your black books. You're not angry with poor me, are you?"

He waved the suggestion away.

"I think it's awfully nice of you to have asked me," he protested.

She rustled up to him with a confiding little gesture, a new light in her eyes and a softer note in her voice.

"And I think it's awfully nice of you to have come. So now we're both satisfied. Do you know," she went on in another tone, "I'd begun to think you'd forgotten all about poor me. You haven't, though, have you?"

"Not a bit."

"I'm glad to hear it," she returned in a half-caressing whisper that made its recipient rather wish the *tête-à-tête* would end. Suddenly, and to his genuine relief, the other guest was announced.

Harrison Elliott, looking bigger and burlier than ever, entered the room. He was reported to be making ten thousand a year by his plays, and he seemed to exude prosperity in every gesture. Adrian watched him enviously, wondering if he himself would ever enjoy a fiftieth part of his reputation, or a hundredth part of his income. Either contingency just then appeared equally remote.

During luncheon neither his hostess nor his fellow-guest made any reference to what he considered the real object of his visit. Adrian was burning to discuss the alterations he had submitted, but he felt a little diffidence about doing so until a lead should first be given him. At last, when the meal was over and they had all returned to the drawing-room for coffee, the dramatist introduced the matter voluntarily.

"Our young friend is getting impatient," he observed. "We ought to put him out of his suspense. I'll begin, then, Mr. Merrick, by saying that I got your suggestions on Thursday evening, and I forwarded them at once to Mrs. Bellingham. She is the person most concerned, you know, as I've made the play over to her lock, stock, and barrel."

"Quite so," returned Adrian, trying to look as though he knew all about it, although this was the first he had heard of the matter.

Mrs. Bellingham rose from the bureau at which she was examining some papers, and came up to the table.

"Here is the manuscript," she exclaimed. "I've made some notes on it, and Mr. Elliott has made some as well. I want to talk to you about them."

She fingered a business-like blue pencil and sat down beside him. Adrian, looking at the sheets of paper, noted with a little feeling of apprehension that the pages had been

heavily scored all over with erasures and interlineations. There seemed very little of his original work left. His glance wandered to Elliott, but that individual was staring out of the window.

Mrs. Bellingham tapped the uppermost sheet absently.

"First of all, I must tell you how much I like what you've done," she declared. "Mr. Elliott was quite enthusiastic—that is, he would have been if he were capable of such an emotion."

The dramatist grinned cheerfully.

"Rub it in, dear lady." Then he turned to the expectant Adrian.

"Seriously, Mr. Merrick, I think you've done very well. It's never an easy matter to tinker with somebody else's work, but you've been uncommonly successful over this."

Adrian glowed with pleasure.

"I'm glad you like it," he said shyly.

"Of course, there are one or two things that won't quite do," went on Mrs. Bellingham. "I see, for example, that you've written in a fresh scene in Act III."

"Well, cut it out," said Adrian magnanimously.

Mrs. Bellingham shook her beautiful head.

"Oh, not at all. I like it immensely, and quite mean to retain it. The mistake is, however, that you've given it to Miss Assheton and yourself. Of course that was a slip, so I've taken the liberty of allotting it to myself. You and I will do it together now."

It seemed to Adrian that, as he caught his eye, there was more than the suggestion of a grin on Harrison Elliott's face. Mrs. Bellingham, however, appeared serenely unconscious that her proposal was not fully approved of.

"I think it strengthens my part—I mean—the play," she added. "We mustn't forget that it's the effect as a whole that we're working for."

"Just as you like," said Adrian blankly, feeling his hopes slipping away, but trying not to show his disappointment. He had counted on playing the scene with Constance.

To do so with anybody else would be another matter entirely.

"I see you've added ten lines to Miss Assheton's part in the last act," observed Elliott. "They're good enough lines, and I like them, but Mrs. Bellingham wants them cut out. She has also decided to take away twenty lines from the same part in the opening scene."

"But that will reduce it to a mere nothing," protested Adrian, feeling that it was high time to assert himself. "It's such a tiny part already," he added.

Mrs. Bellingham looked up sharply.

"I think I'm the best judge of that. It's really necessary," she went on in a more conciliatory tone. "If we leave the lines in it will put the part out of all proportion to the remaining ones. Besides, the lines aren't really lost. I've incorporated them into my own part. We mustn't think of individuals, you know. What we have to aim at is to make a play in which everybody will have an equal chance."

"All right," said Adrian, feeling that argument was thrown away. He wondered at the same time, though, how he was going to make his peace with Miss Assheton. The reflection that she would probably blame him for reducing her already modest enough rôle to such small limits was rather disturbing. He stole a glance at Elliott, and noted that individual appeared to be much amused about something.

"Well, now that everything is settled so nicely," announced Mrs. Bellingham, "I don't think we need discuss the play any more. I've told Mr. Keene to call a rehearsal for Monday morning at twelve. Mr. Antony will be there, and he may also have some suggestions to make."

There were numerous other matters that Adrian wanted to talk over, but in the face of this intimation he thought it best to refrain from doing so just then. When Elliott said good-bye a few minutes later, he followed his example and left the flat with him.

"I shall see you again to-morrow," said Mrs. Bellingham

confidentially, as she shook hands with the dramatist. "By the time we meet at the theatre I dare say you and Mr. Merrick will have thought of some way of improving the small parts. There are some leading ladies who never let anybody else in their companies have a chance. No one, however, can say that I'm one of that sort."

Harrison Elliott's left eyelid dropped slightly, but he made no remark. Adrian, following him out of the room, wondered at his self-control.

"If you're going Piccadilly way," announced his companion, as he hailed a passing hansom, "I'll give you a lift and drop you again. No, I don't quite mean that. Look here, I'm going down to the Green Room to see a man on business. He won't be there before five, though, so I wish you'd come along with me. I want to talk over that little one-act play you sent me."

Adrian accepted the invitation gladly. He had nothing to do for the rest of the afternoon, and Elliott was a useful person to cultivate.

On reaching the club his host took him up to a small smoking-room at the top of the house. The building seemed almost deserted. Indeed, with the exception of a couple of blue-chinned individuals who were snoring peacefully behind copies of the "Era" in the reading-room, and a pasty-faced comedian who, as they passed him on the stairs, shot envious glances at Adrian's companion, there appeared to be no one about.

"All the great actors spend their summer Sundays in the country, and the minor ones stop in bed and invent lies about the smart house-parties they've joined for the week-end," observed Elliott. "They're a low lot, are actors—taking them all round. What the deuce do you want to be one for?"

"I'm not particularly keen on it, but what can I do instead?"

"Follow my excellent example, of course. Write plays,

and make a pot of money out of 'em. You can do it, I know. That little curtain-raiser of yours is quite good."

Adrian flushed with pleasure.

"I'm glad you like it. Do you think it will do, then?"

"No, I'm quite sure it won't—not in its present form, at any rate. Still, I think it could be licked into shape, and I don't mind speaking to our friend in Hans Place about it. There's more than half a chance that it may suit her. Now I'll give you a tip that will be worth a lot to you some day. If you mean to take up play-writing seriously, don't study your audience. Study your actors and actresses instead. It's for them one has to write—not for any one else. What I mean is, that if you want to suit a leading man or a leading lady you must provide that person with a big part, and no one else with more than the suggestion of one. I dare say your experience of the way in which your hostess received your proposed alterations this afternoon will convince you of this."

"Yes," returned Adrian thoughtfully. "I don't think the time has been wasted. At any rate, I've found out what to avoid where she is concerned."

The other laughed good-naturedly.

"I've no doubt you have. Mrs. Bellingham, whatever her faults, doesn't beat about the bush. When I accepted a commission to write 'Whitehall' for her she was refreshingly candid. She told me exactly what she wanted. She was never to be off the stage for more than five minutes at a time, and no other woman was to have a decent part. She's not jealous of men, but she is of her own sex."

Adrian digested the information slowly. It made certain matters clear to him.

"It's awfully good of you, Mr. Elliott, to have given me the chance of doing this work," he said.

"Pooh! You've nothing to be particularly thankful for. I'm drawing the fees, not you, although Mrs. Bellingham will, for decency's sake, have to give you a tenner or so for your trouble."

"I couldn't take it."

"Why on earth not?"

"Well, it was a friendly arrangement."

"Rot! Don't let the lady talk you round, or you'll never be a successful dramatist. Besides, if you hadn't done the work she would have had to call in a hack and pay him a fee. I was so sick of the whole thing, and her continual demands for alterations, that I made the play over to her entirely, with full permission to maul it about as she pleased. It was her own suggestion that you should try your 'prentice hand on it. And I must say you've been very successful. It's a better play now than ever it was—although that's not saying much, perhaps. Well, all I've got to say now is, don't be in too great a hurry to set the Thames on fire. You won't conquer the managers all at once. It's a long way to the top of the dramatic tree, and very windy when you get there. Even the modest seat I have on the lower branches isn't too secure."

Adrian felt a little disheartened, but he tried not to show it. To have a layman like Marchmont—who at the best could only speak from hearsay evidence—gibing at actors and actresses was bad enough; but it was intolerable for a man of Harrison Elliott's position to do the same. He ought to be above it. The very people whom he affected to despise were the very ones to whom he owed his means of livelihood. The best he could do would be to observe common gratitude towards them.

A waiter came up to say that his host was wanted on the telephone. Adrian welcomed the interruption.

"Well, good-bye," he said. "I'm off now. Thanks for your improving conversation."

The dramatist grinned.

"You're welcome, young man."

# XVII

TO all outward appearances the theatre was quite deserted when the company's newest recruit arrived there the next morning. The little knot of carpenters and scene shifters who were generally to be found loafing about outside were not in evidence at all, and the narrow passage leading up to the stage entrance looked grimier and more forbidding than ever. Even the posters on the wall, announcing that the building would reopen in September with a new play, were torn and dilapidated, whilst the dust of weeks lay thick on the dingy lamp-glass overhead.

The doorkeeper, annoyed at being disturbed over his morning's study of the betting news, affected to regard Adrian as a stranger. He came out of his gloomy little pen and barred the passage.

"What name?" he demanded gruffly.

"Same as last time. See if you've got any letters for me, and try to look a little more cheerful."

The man stumped back to his desk.

"Let me see, name o' Merrick, Esquire, ain't it?" he returned, groping among some pigeon-holes that ran the entire length of one wall.

"Quite right. What did you think it was?"

"One never knows," was the tranquil reply. "All sorts of people come here at times—gentlemen as well as actors. I didn't know which you was, sir, for the moment. Yes, I've got something for you. Here it is."

Adrian took the letter and went upstairs to his dressing-room with it. Arrived there, he lit a cigarette and examined

the envelope. It was of a cheap blue paper—obviously designed in imitation of the latest Bond Street style—and a sickly odour of stephanotis arose from it. The handwriting was strange to him, but he could see that it was a woman's. A big S—entwined with forget-me-nots—sprawled in suburban fashion over the flap. He tore it open and drew out the enclosure.

The printed heading, "Sandringham," in large letters across the top, made him rub his eyes. Immediately underneath, however, in very small ones, were the words, "Kitchener Villas, Clapham Park." The signature, "Yours very sincerely, Stella Mortimer," gave him the name of his correspondent.

"Now what on earth does that young woman want?" he exclaimed wonderingly, as he read the note.

> Sandringham, Kitchener Villas,
> Park Crescent, Clapham Park, S.W.
>
> Dear Mr. Merrick,
>
> I shan't see you at the rehearsal to-day, as the principals are not required. Will you come and have tea with me here on Wednesday afternoon at four o'clock? Do come if you can. I am only inviting a few intimate friends. Miss Assheton and Mr. Hood have promised to join me, as well as one or two other members of the company.
>
> "If you don't know your way here, Mr. Hood can tell you, as he lives in the next road.
>
> With kind regards,
>
> Yours very sincerely,
> Stella Mortimer.
>
> Saturday.
>
> P.S.—You can get a tram past the door of the house.

Adrian threw the letter into the fireplace and went downstairs thinking over it. He had no desire to cultivate Miss

Mortimer's acquaintance, but he certainly wanted to see Constance Assheton again. Well, he would meet her on the stage in a few minutes, and he could talk about the invitation then.

But in this he was disappointed, for when he groped his way through the darkness and found himself standing before the footlights, no one else had arrived. Presently a carpenter appeared, grumbling audibly at the lack of consideration on Mrs. Bellingham's part in calling a rehearsal at all.

"A chap scarcely gets time for a drink in this 'ere theayter," he complained. "We're not like you play-actors, sir. It's work, work, work—all the blooming day and 'arf the blooming night as well—for us staff. Fair slave-driving—that's wot I calls it."

Suddenly the man appeared galvanized into energy, for he seized his bag of tools and began to fit a brace bit together as though his life depended on completing the operation without a moment's delay. Looking round to discover the cause of this unwonted activity, Adrian saw the spare figure of Felix Keene emerge from the wings.

"Good morning, Mr. Merrick," said the stage manager. "You're here early, aren't you?"

"It's five minutes to eleven. The rehearsal was called for the hour, wasn't it?"

Keene gave a short laugh.

"You're a bit new to rehearsals, I can see, or you'd know that no one will dream of turning up until half an hour after the time. Some of 'em think it beneath their precious dignity to come even then. Our leading lady's a terror in that respect. She thinks nothing of calling a rehearsal at ten and not coming near the place herself until two in the afternoon. She gives herself the airs of two duchesses put together now. By Jove! she's changed a lot since the days when she was Gracie Dodd."

"When was that?" asked Adrian, thinking that his informant referred to some old part that Mrs. Bellingham had played.

"Before you were born or thought of, I should think. Hullo, here's some one else come at last."

The new arrival was Aubrey Hood. He had been spending a week of his holiday with a somewhat disreputable baronet in the country, and was very full of the visit. Indeed, he insisted on giving a detailed account of the people he had met there. None of these seemed to be under the rank of a duke or a duchess, and the speaker appeared to have been on the most intimate terms with all of them. Adrian very soon grew tired of hearing how the ladies of the house-party had yielded to his charms. He welcomed with relief the sudden appearance of Bedford.

The comedian, who seemed only partly sober, was in the best of spirits. He greeted the others effusively, and pretended to be much impressed by a story about himself and a certain lady of title which Hood was just concluding.

"Well, Aubrey, my boy, and what's the latest news from Buckingham Palace—or is it Windsor Castle where you were staying last?" he inquired, winking violently at Keene. "I'm not so thick with the Smart Set as you are. In fact, I've only managed ten days with my missus at Margate."

The leading man stalked indignantly away, muttering something about "drunken barnstormers."

Bedford grinned expansively.

"That chap's like a page out of 'M.A.P.'" he declared. "You'd think he never knew any one who hadn't a title. I may be a drunken barnstormer, but Master Aubrey's an affected ape, and there's no getting over that. Well, talking's dry work. Come and have a gentle drink with me before this blessed rehearsal starts. We've time, haven't we, Mr. Keene?"

"Always time for a drink, dear boy."

Adrian excused himself, and crossed the stage as the other two passed through the wings. The tippling little actor rather disgusted him, and after a very short time his vulgarity ceased to be amusing. As he moved towards the

big switchboard he came upon Aubrey Hood reading a letter.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the leading man, "where's our refined comedian?"

"I fancy he's in the nearest pub by this time."

"Well, I hope he'll drown himself in his filthy gin, then," returned the other sharply. "I say," he added, with a change of manner, "are you going to Miss Mortimer's bun-struggle on Wednesday? She tells me that Connie Assheton and one or two other people will be there. I think it will be rather good fun. Connie is always entertaining, at any rate."

The familiar reference to Miss Assheton annoyed Adrian intensely. The conceit, the airs and graces, and attitude of patronage towards the whole company which Hood habitually adopted often made his foot itch to kick him. He did not want to quarrel with him, however, for he knew that the leading man exerted a good deal of influence one way and another with the management, and he also felt that any rupture between them would recoil upon that member of the company in whom he himself was most interested. Accordingly, he replied that he intended to go if no other engagement prevented it.

"I don't quite know where Clapham Park is," observed the other in his most affected tone, "but it's probably somewhere on the map. I believe one breaks the journey at Wandsworth. People oughtn't to live in these beastly suburbs."

Felix Keene, with Bedford and another man, came through the pass door.

"We'll start directly," he exclaimed. "There is a cheering rumour that Mrs. Bellingham is in sight at last."

"I don't see the rest of the ladies yet," said Adrian, wondering why the one he was thinking of particularly had not arrived.

"And you're not likely to, either," was the reply. "This morning's run through is for principals only. We're not

doing anything but the second scene of the first act. There'll be a call for every one on Thursday. You must restrain your impatience to meet your lady friends until then."

It was as much as Adrian could do not to show disappointment at the news. He had looked forward to seeing Constance Assheton, and he did not care about waiting another three days. The feeling, however, that Hood was watching him closely made him receive the information with apparent indifference.

He opened his part and began to refresh his memory from it. He had scarcely turned over the first page, however, when Mrs. Bellingham appeared. She was beautifully dressed, and looked positively radiant. As she swept down the stage with the peculiar graceful movement that always marked her, Adrian thought she seemed younger than ever.

"Good morning!" she exclaimed brightly, throwing a comprehensive smile round the group. "If you're ready, we'd better make a start, Mr. Keene. I don't feel inclined to stop longer than necessary."

The rehearsal was over fairly early, for Mrs. Bellingham only wanted a couple of scenes to be gone through. As soon as these were over she declared herself completely satisfied.

Adrian, with the other members of the company, was about to leave the stage when Mrs. Bellingham called him back.

"If you're not in a great hurry, Mr. Merrick," she said, "I'd like to try that new scene with you. Mr. Antony is coming to watch it. He may not be here for ten minutes, though, so come round to my dressing-room and have a chat with me first. I want to hear all about your continental experiences. You didn't lose your heart to anybody abroad, I hope?"

"No," returned Adrian truthfully, "I didn't."

There were a couple of people in the dressing-room waiting to speak to its occupant. One was the business manager, and the other was Raphael Montagu. Antony, looking

rather less saturnine than usual, greeted Adrian with some show of cordiality, while his companion bestowed on him an oily smile that was meant to be ingratiating, but which had, however, a contrary effect.

Mrs. Bellingham went over to the desk where he was sitting and took up a typed sheet of paper. Then she turned to Adrian.

"Mr. Montagu has been getting out one of his clever little paragraphs for the papers about my provincial arrangements. Tell me what you think of it. Read it to us, Mr. Montagu."

The young Hebrew smirked more broadly than ever, ran his bediamonded fingers through his hair, and read out the literary effort on which he had been engaged.

"Provincial playgoers will learn with satisfaction that Mrs. Bellingham, the distinguished actress, is about to make a series of professional visits to the principal towns. During this tour——"

Mrs. Bellingham held up a jewelled hand.

"One moment, please."

The Press agent turned towards her inquiringly.

"Yes?"

"I think you might say, in the first line, 'will learn with extreme satisfaction.' Then, in the next line, instead of 'the distinguished actress,' it would be better to put 'the eminent London actress.'"

Mr. Montagu smirked again as he made the necessary alterations.

"Certainly, madam—a great improvement. Then I go on to say, 'During this tour Mrs. Bellingham will present her latest London success, 'Whitehall,' a four-act costume drama from the pen of the famous dramatist, Harrison Elliott. The piece has been played to crowded and enthusiastic audiences throughout the whole of the London season at the Embankment Theatre, and it is safe to anticipate for it an equally favourable reception in the country. The production will everywhere be on the same lavish scale as

that which marked the representation in London, and no expense has been spared over the mounting. A company of recognized West End artistes—included among whom are Mr. Aubrey Hood, Mr. Adrian Merrick, Miss Stella Mortimer, and Miss Constance Assheton—will support Mrs. Bellingham.'"

"That sounds all right, I think," announced Mrs. Bellingham reflectively. "There's one thing, though, that won't quite do. You've got in too many names. It only confuses people. I think you'd better strike out Miss Assheton."

Adrian heard the suggestion with dismay.

"I say," he exclaimed, "if any name has to be struck out, it had much better be mine."

"Why?" demanded Mrs. Bellingham blandly.

"Oh, well, because it's not at all important, and Miss Assheton's is," returned Adrian, feeling somewhat confused.

"I think," observed Antony, in his most cutting tones, "that that must be left to Mrs. Bellingham's judgment."

"I'll consider the matter," returned that lady, with a promptitude for which Adrian was sincerely grateful. There was an ominous ring in her voice, however, that made him feel that he had not done Miss Assheton much good by his intervention.

After discussing one or two other business matters with the manager, Mrs. Bellingham announced it time to go back to the stage. She wanted to satisfy herself, she explained, how the new scene went, and there was just time to do so before going off to lunch.

With Antony looking severely critical in the stalls, and the smirking Montagu officiating as prompter, Adrian felt that there was something of an audience. The fact made him a little self-conscious, and he hesitated rather over his lines. Mrs. Bellingham, on the other hand, appeared as usual to be serenely indifferent to everybody's presence but her own. The scene they were rehearsing was of a distinctly sentimental nature, and the warmth which she put into the different speeches occasioned Adrian more than a

touch of embarrassment. If only he had been playing the part with Constance Assheton—as had been his ingenuous intention when writing the lines—he would have enjoyed it immensely. As it was, however, he wished Mrs. Bellingham would not think it necessary to put quite so much realism into her embraces. Once when he came off the stage he noted a meaning leer on the Press agent's face, which instantly changed to one of fawning subserviency as Mrs. Bellingham looked round in the same direction.

"Well, what do you think of it, Mr. Antony?" she demanded.

"I think that Mr. Merrick might put a little more—er—passion into it," was the reply.

"That's just what I've been thinking, too. Don't be afraid to let yourself go, Mr. Merrick. You're supposed to be an ardent lover, you know."

"Quite so," replied Adrian moodily. Then he went over the last few lines again. This time he managed to acquit himself with more satisfaction, and was rewarded by an expression of approval from Mrs. Bellingham.

As she disappeared through the pass door to speak to the manager a few minutes later, Mr. Montagu jerked his thumb towards her and winked knowingly at Adrian.

"Bit of a cough-drop, Mr. Merrick, ain't she?" he remarked. "I thought I should have died of laughing when she was stroking your hand just now."

"It's a pity you didn't, then."

Mr. Montagu stared after him as he stalked away, his sallow face flushing unpleasantly.

"H'm, inclined to be 'aughty," he murmured. "Well, that's a game two can play at."

# XVIII

KITCHENER VILLAS, Park Crescent, was the martial name bestowed by an enterprising jerry-builder upon a row of stuccoed horrors—described by the imaginative agent commissioned to let them as "select villa residences"—skirting the edge of Clapham Common. Each little red-brick house was so exactly like its neighbour—even down to the strip of dejected mignonette that struggled for existence on either side of each front door—that one could only be told from the other by its name. Most of these were of an extremely high-sounding nature, for the residents in Park Crescent scorned to acknowledge mere numbers as their means of identification. Thus, the first gate-post had "Balmoral" painted on it, and the next one was emblazoned "Chatsworth," while "Sandringham," in which Miss Mortimer lived, was flanked by "Welbeck" and "Arundel." The only notable omission seemed to be "Buckingham Palace."

Stella Mortimer, as a lady in the enviable position of being more or less permanently engaged at a good salary, could afford to live fairly comfortably. She was the sole tenant of "Sandringham," and kept on her lease there even when she happened to be touring. A strikingly, but rather showily, handsome young woman, and a capable actress in certain limited rôles, she had a great opinion of her histrionic abilities. Her age was twenty-six, and—according to envious report—had been so for at least ten years.

From the moment when she first made Adrian's acquaintance at the theatre, Stella Mortimer exerted herself to impress him favourably. His good looks, his cheerful dis-

position, his charming manners, and general air of breeding, all appealed to her strongly. He was very different from most of the men—and especially those connected with the stage—that she had come across hitherto. Her experience of these was comprehensive.

If Adrian had wished deliberately to attract Miss Mortimer he could not have proceeded better than he did by his habitual attitude of indifference towards her. He was always perfectly civil when they met at the theatre or elsewhere, but never anything more. Piqued by this unaccustomed reception of her advances, the actress redoubled her efforts to attract him. She was clever enough to see that in Mrs. Bellingham she had a dangerous rival, and sufficiently alive to her own professional interests not to give that lady any cause for suspecting the true state of her feelings. Where Constance Assheton was concerned, however, the case was entirely different, and she regarded the growing intimacy between her and Adrian with strong disfavour. That Constance—whom, in the light of her own stage experience, she looked upon as a mere beginner—could dare to compete with herself was intolerable. If she could have done so with safety to her own plans, she would have schemed to oust her from the company. She recognised, however, that this would almost certainly lead to Adrian throwing up his own engagement. Accordingly, she remained on friendly terms with her outwardly.

When Stella Mortimer first conceived the idea of asking Adrian to tea at her own house, she fully intended to leave her rival—for so she regarded Constance—out of the party. Then it occurred to her that unless he knew she was coming, the much-desired guest would probably decline to be present. Her original scheme, accordingly, underwent a modification. Having ascertained, by means of skilful questioning, for what afternoon Miss Assheton happened to be already engaged, she wrote her a friendly little note asking her to tea on that particular day. As she confidently expected, the invitation was declined.

What started the fires of Miss Mortimer's wrath was that on several occasions when they had been playing together Constance had been cast for better parts than herself. It was true that she figured above her on the programmes and also drew a larger salary, but she was by no means satisfied with this. For a long time she contented herself with making ill-natured remarks in the dressing-room, and trying to enlist the sympathies of Aubrey Hood, who, as leading man, was popularly supposed to exert considerable influence with the management. When "Whitehall" was produced, however, and she found herself allotted a rôle of distinctly less importance than that bestowed on Constance, she felt it time to adopt stronger measures. She was sufficiently alive to her own interests, however, to refrain from making any complaint to the author. It was to Mrs. Bellingham that she went instead.

The amount of satisfaction she derived from her interview with that lady did not have a very soothing effect. Mrs. Bellingham received her blandly, listened with apparent attention to her complaint, and then calmly declared that she was not going to interfere.

"My dear Miss Mortimer," she remarked, "it's quite absurd to expect me to concern myself about the relative importance of the minor members of my company. There is only one individual whose interests have to be consulted—and that is myself."

Nor was Aubrey Hood, to whom the disappointed young woman confided the opinion that "Connie Assheton was a designing cat," much more sympathetic.

"My dear girl," he assured her lightly, "what of it? We're all designing cats in the theatrical profession. It's only the sex that differs."

"Then you mean that I'm a cat?" demanded his interviewer, bridling.

The leading man blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"I think you're a very charming person indeed," he replied

diplomatically. "And if you continue to be so I'll take you to lunch at Richmond on Sunday. There's something to look forward to!"

Stella had set her heart upon making her projected tea-party a success. There were several people in the neighbourhood whom she wished to propitiate, and several more whom she was anxious to inspire with envy. Aubrey Hood was responsible for kindling flames of admiration—if, indeed, nothing more—in the breasts of countless suburban young women who flocked eagerly to any matinée at which he happened to be playing. His portrait on a picture postcard occupied the place of honour in hundreds of villa residences. For them to see her on terms of intimacy with their idol would, accordingly, send her up very much in their estimation. Even Mrs. Finch, the wife of the richest draper in Clapham, and a lady who affected to despise "play-actors," altered her tone and angled desperately for an invitation as soon as she knew that the great man was expected.

Aubrey Hood was by way of being one of Stella Mortimer's numerous admirers, and one to whom she herself had shown a good deal of favour. To her rather suburban mind he stood for a typical man of fashion, modelled after the pattern of the fascinating heroes of the novelettes that formed her favourite reading. An impression—carefully fostered by himself—that he had been at Eton and Oxford was current in theatrical circles, and did much to invest him with a reputation for belonging to a much better family than was really the case. As a matter of fact, he was the son of a hard-working baker in a small way of business, and whenever he was guilty of some little solecism, those of his enemies who were in the secret of his origin would cruelly remark that it was merely evidence of "bread in the bone." To give him his due, however, he was very seldom guilty of a slip, for ever since he was quite a boy he had sedulously set himself to copy his superiors in every way. A circumstance that stood him in good stead was that he had the hide of a

rhinoceros, and was quite impervious to snubs. By some strange means—which his acquaintances never succeeded in fathoming—he had managed to get elected to one or two good clubs, and these he was clever enough to use for his social advantage. As for the Eton and Oxford story it was partly true. He had been to both places—several times.

From the moment when Adrian first came to the Embankment Theatre the actor cultivated him assiduously. He could see that the new recruit was of very much better social standing than any one else in the company—with the exception, perhaps, of Godfrey Deane. As a leading man and an actor of established position, he had thought himself justified in beginning by patronizing him. He was quick, however, to see his mistake, and altered his tactics accordingly. Adrian found his excessive friendliness almost as distasteful as the superciliousness which preceded it. In his desire to be on good terms with every one, however, he concealed his feelings and responded readily enough to the other's advances. It was only privately, and to people like Deane and Marchmont, that he stated his real opinion of Mrs. Bellingham's leading man.

"The chap's an awful bounder," was his verdict, "but he seems anxious to be civil."

When he volunteered to show him the way to Miss Mortimer's house, Adrian, although he would rather have gone by himself, felt that it would be churlish to decline. As the readiest means of repaying the civility he asked his guide to luncheon beforehand. The invitation was accepted with alacrity. Over the meal Adrian's opinion of the actor rather changed, for Hood, when he chose to take a little trouble, could prove an extremely agreeable individual. He did so on this occasion certainly, and, as soon as he recognized that anecdotes about his titled friends did not arouse much enthusiasm, proceeded to discuss subjects of mutual interest in a manner that compelled the other's attention. The time

slipped by so pleasantly, indeed, that neither noticed how late it was getting.

Suddenly Hood looked at his watch.

"This won't do," he exclaimed. "It's half-past three already. We must be getting on if we want to arrive at the fair Stella's tea-fight this afternoon."

# XIX

THEY were rather late in reaching Kitchener Villas, for Hood, who still thought it necessary to affect entire ignorance of the neighbourhood, proceeded there by a somewhat roundabout way. When at length they entered the house, Adrian realized that the "little party" he had been invited to was in reality quite a large one. At any rate, the drawing-room was filled with people, while he could also see through the doorway a solid phalanx of others gathered round a tea-table.

Miss Mortimer, in a very smart dress and an expansive smile, welcomed her guests effusively. The reception accorded to Adrian struck him as gushing in the extreme. She bore down upon him like a whirlwind from which there was no escape.

"My dear Mr. Merrick," she exclaimed shrilly, "how positively sweet of you to have come! And you, too, Mr. Hood. But why have you kept poor little me waiting so long? Now come and be introduced. There are lots of people here who want to know you. Oh, excuse me one moment. I must go and speak to dear Mrs. Finch, who has just come in."

As she fluttered away to greet the new arrival, Adrian took a leisurely survey of the room and its occupants. Both reflected Suburbia very strongly; the one with its imitation Chippendale, profusion of antimacassars, and plush-framed photographs; and the other with its crowd of would-be smart young men and women. Most of the former affected frock coats and remarkably yellow boots, while nearly all the latter wore large picture hats and displayed a greater

amount of silk underskirt than seemed altogether necessary. Few of them had any pretensions to good looks. Adrian, indeed, thought he had never seen quite so many plain young women in one room.

Aubrey Hood, standing beside him, caught his eye and smiled superciliously.

"This rather reminds one of a bargain sale at Whiteley's," he murmured.

"Why?"

"Oh, 'all goods marked in plain figures,' you know."

Then he sauntered away to an inner room where tea was being dispensed.

Adrian, feeling extremely bored, was thinking of following his example, when a girl fluttered up to him. She was by way of being rather pretty, and he had noticed her looking at him eagerly as he came in.

"Please forgive me," she said with a simper, "but I felt I must speak to you. I've seen every part you've played, and admired them awfully. It's curious, though, that you should look so different off the stage. I want you to write your name in my autograph album presently. It's so interesting, you know, to get the signatures of distinguished actors."

Adrian raised his eyebrows.

"I'm afraid you flatter me. The fact is, I'm not at all 'distinguished.'"

The lady simpered again.

"That's your modesty, I'm sure. Fancy being modest, though, after playing so many leading parts!"

"I haven't played any leading parts at all yet," protested Adrian, who was feeling somewhat mystified.

His companion regarded him with mild wonder.

"How can you say that," she demanded, "when you were the Duke of Buckingham in 'Whitehall' at the Embankment?"

Adrian began to see a little daylight.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you appear to be confusing me with somebody else."

A look of genuine distress spread over the other's face.

"What!" she gasped. "Aren't you Aubrey Hood—Mrs. Bellingham's leading man, then?"

"Not yet," returned Adrian gravely. "My name happens to be Merrick, and the part I played in that piece was a very small one indeed. But please don't look so distressed," he added. "That's Mr. Hood, standing in the doorway. Let me introduce you to him."

The moment he was relieved of his new acquaintance Adrian looked round anxiously for Constance. She was not in that room, however, nor apparently in the next one, either, for the most diligent search failed to reveal any trace of her. Several young women cast eager glances at him as he passed them by, but he had no eyes for any, and leaned moodily in a corner wondering why she did not appear.

Presently his hostess caught sight of him, and fluttered through the crowd.

"Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed in her most kittenish manner. "Poor little me has been looking for you everywhere. Lots of charming ladies here are dying to know you. I must introduce you to Mrs. Finch. She's an extremely influential person."

Adrian sincerely hoped that the large lady he had noticed eyeing him admiringly from a far corner, and who was wearing a dress of such vivid colour that he felt he ought to have come provided with smoked glasses, was not the individual to whom his hostess alluded. From the way in which she looked up, however, at the mention of her name, he realised that there was no room for any such hope.

"I don't see Miss Assheton anywhere," he observed tentatively, as he followed his guide across the room.

"I'm sorry, but she has disappointed me," was the calm reply. "It seems that she has another engagement. No doubt she'll come in later, though."

Mrs. Finch beamed as the captive was brought up to her. She leaned forward until the frail chair she was sitting on

creaked ominously beneath her capacious form, and held out a tightly gloved hand.

"Pleased to meet you," she observed. "Quite a lot of people here, aren't there?"

"There seem to be a good many," returned Adrian, who, annoyed at Constance's absence, was not conversationally inclined.

"Yes, but very mixed. You should hear what my Finch says. He doesn't hold with tea-parties at all."

Adrian regarded her wonderingly.

"Your—er—Finch?

His companion smiled with great good nature.

"Yes, my husband. You haven't met him, then? Perhaps you don't live in this neighbourhood, though?"

"No," said Adrian, "I don't."

"It's very select," returned the expert complacently. "Still, it's not what it used to be. There are a good many actors round about us now. Oh, I beg your pardon!" she added in a tone of distress. "I was forgetting that you're one yourself."

Adrian smiled.

"A very unimportant one, I assure you. Indeed, I've no doubt lots of people would say I wasn't an actor at all."

"But you're on the stage, surely?"

"Certainly I am."

Mrs. Finch looked at him as though she were not quite sure whether he had taken too much refreshment, or was trying to poke fun at her. Observing, however, that Adrian did not appear abashed, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, and promptly changed the subject. After all, he was far and away the handsomest young man in the room, and she had the pleasing knowledge that the way she monopolized him was making everybody else exceedingly envious.

"Oh, there's dear Mr. Aubrey Hood!" she exclaimed presently. "He's talking to Gertie Pringle—the girl who was so forward with you just now, Mr. Merrick. She's making up to him, the minx, in a perfectly shameless manner.

I must say I think he's awfully good-looking, though. He always reminds me of Hayden Coffin; or is it Edmund Payne?"

The next moment, to Adrian's relief, some one came up and carried off the good lady. He used his freedom to cross over to Godfrey Deane, of whom he had just caught sight. They had not met since the last night of the Embankment season, and each was full of news.

"I'm off directly," announced Deane, after they had chatted together for a few minutes. "This is getting a bit too thick. That long-haired genius, standing beside the piano, has just threatened to sing. Miss Mortimer was rash enough to ask him a moment ago. He's known as the Clapham Caruso, and fancies himself no end."

"I'll go, too," declared Adrian. "I'm tired of this. Besides, I want to have a talk with you. Come and dine with me somewhere."

"Thanks, my dear chap, but it's impossible to-night. There's a dress rehearsal at the St. George's at seven, and I shall have to fly, simply. We might go as far as Victoria together, though."

They parted at Charing Cross, Deane bound for the theatre, and Adrian to return to his solitary rooms. It was a fine evening, and, as he had nothing particular to do, he decided to walk back. The exercise would do him good, and he might look in at Marchmont's club on the way, and discover if that enterprising journalist would dine with him.

It was seven o'clock, and the Strand was crowded. Homeward-bound clerks and emancipated shop-girls monopolised the pavements, while raucous-voiced newsboys displaying effervescent placards disputed positions in the gutter with a melancholy line of sandwichmen. Just outside the post-office at Charing Cross Adrian paused for a moment to allow the stream of traffic, which met there in an almost solid mass, to pass him. A girl, mounting an omnibus, which was lumbering along towards Westminster, caught his eye. He stared after her intently, feeling that there was something

familiar in her appearance. Suddenly he recognized the graceful poise of the head—he would have known it anywhere. The next moment, heedless of cabs and everything else, he darted across the road and sprang on to the steps, just as the vehicle stopped to let a passenger dismount.

"You seems in a bit of a hurry," observed the conductor, jerking at the bell-rope in signal for the driver to go on again.

"And you seem to have too much to say," retorted Adrian. Then he clambered up to the top and looked round eagerly. A girl was sitting on the only seat occupied. Although she had her back to him, he saw at once that his first idea had been correct.

"Miss Assheton!" he exclaimed.

At the sound of her name Constance turned quickly, a puzzled look on her face. As she recognized who had spoken, however, it was succeeded by a smile of welcome.

"Mr. Merrick!" she exclaimed in turn, holding out her hand. "Well, this is a surprise!"

"And a very nice one, too," returned Adrian promptly; "for me, at any rate. May I sit down, please?" he added, with a meaning glance at the remainder of the seat.

The girl laughed, but a soft colour stole into her face as she made room.

"Certainly. It's not my bus."

"Thanks."

He shot a covert glance at her as he seated himself. She had never seemed so pretty, he thought. There was a freshness about her—a charm and daintiness that struck him as being more pronounced than usual. A little tendril of her fair hair had escaped from its fastening, and waved gently in the breeze. Her eyes fell on him, and he wondered what gentle thoughts lay beneath their still depths.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you again," he declared impetuously. "By the way, I had hoped we should meet at Miss Mortimer's this afternoon. I've just come away. Why didn't you go?"

"I think the fact that I wasn't asked had something to do with it," returned Constance serenely. "No, let me be quite fair—I was asked, but not until it was known that I'd already made arrangements to go somewhere else. However, I'm very glad to see you now, so we needn't talk about that."

As the bus creaked and jolted its way down the street, Adrian began to debate the feasibility of an idea that had just occurred to him. The more he thought of it the more he felt pleased with it. Constance, however, would have to co-operate, and he was not quite certain if this would suit her. He looked at her for encouragement, and fancied that he found it.

"I say," he remarked, "where are you off to just now?"

"Home—that is, to my rooms at Kennington. I dine at half-past seven, and it can't be far off that now."

"Look here," said Adrian boldly, "it's a lovely evening, and it's a pity to waste it indoors. I wish you'd let me take you to Earl's Court for a couple of hours or so. We can dine there, you know."

The girl turned to him, her eyes twinkling with quiet amusement.

"Are you sure you won't be bored with two whole hours of my society?"

"Quite."

"Very well, then. It's very nice of you to ask me, and I shall be glad to go."

The expedition proved a complete success, and Adrian congratulated himself over and over again upon his inspiration. He enjoyed the evening immensely, perhaps all the more so because he knew that Constance was enjoying herself too. He had never seen her so bright and animated. Everything interested and amused her. She was an ideal companion.

They dined at the Welcome Club, and sat out in the grounds afterwards, listening to the band and watching the crowd. It was a sultry night, with scarcely a breath of wind; and they both found it pleasanter to sit still than to walk

about. A big Chinese lantern dangling from a tree just over their chairs lit up Constance's face. The expression of absolute content on it effectually removed any lingering doubts that might have been in Adrian's mind. He knew that she was happy, and the knowledge filled him with delight. The strains of a Strauss waltz floated to them on the still night air, mingling harmoniously with the gentle hum of laughter and talk all round. Then, with the last drawn out notes of the clarionets, they died down and ceased altogether.

Constance gave a little sigh of content.

Adrian laughed in sympathy, and lit another cigar.

"This is rather nice, isn't it?"

She looked at him shyly, her colour deepening a little.

"Yes," she answered softly. "What a pity it can't last, though."

Something in her tone made him glance up sharply. The lamp overhead had burnt itself out, and in the semi-darkness —for the moon was hidden for a moment by a thick bank of clouds—he could not see her face very clearly. There was light enough, however, for him to note something that glistened suspiciously on the damask cheek nearest him. He wondered if it were a tear, and if so what it was doing there.

Her voice, however, was perfectly controlled when she spoke again.

"I don't think I ought to stop out any longer. The last trains get so crowded, and it will be late as it is before I reach Kennington."

"Very well, then. We'll start at once."

It was nearer closing time than they thought, and a considerable number of homeward-bound visitors were making for the same exit as themselves. The crowd, indeed, was so dense that at one point Adrian became separated from his companion. Fortunately, he caught sight of her a moment later.

"Please take my arm," he said authoritatively.

She slipped her arm into his without a word. The contact

thrilled him. He could have found it in his heart to bless the crowd.

As they approached the Brompton Road exit the press of people grew denser. Immediately in front of them was a weedy youth, with an overdressed servant girl hanging on his arm, engaged in winding up an evening's dissipation by the consumption of unpleasant-looking confectionery from a paper bag. Oblivious of the presence of everybody else, they carried on an amatory conversation in loud tones. Adrian began to feel embarrassed at the increasing intimacy of the terms in which they addressed one another. He was relieved to see, however, that Constance was merely amused.

A few minutes later a buxom matron, following close on his heels, pushed him against the young woman. Her escort turned round angrily.

"Nah then!" he exclaimed. "I'll thank you politely not to shove my lady friend like that."

"How would you like me to do it, then?" inquired Adrian blandly.

The girl giggled and nudged her companion playfully.

"Some of these blooming toffs fancy themselves, don't they?" she remarked.

"Not 'arf," was the enigmatical reply. Then the two moved forward a few steps, and Adrian, to his relief, found their places taken by another couple.

Presently, a temporary stoppage on the way to the barrier ensuing, the youth produced a packet of cheap cigarettes. Lighting one, he threw the match into a receptacle for waste paper fixed against a doorway. Instantly it flared up, setting the contents in a blaze. A well-meaning but over-zealous attendant, following close behind, lunged at it with a stick. The basket was promptly upset and the burning contents fell out on to a pile of shavings. A thin tongue of flame rose from it, and the edge of an adjacent curtain began to smoulder ominously. At the sight a neurotic young woman shouted "Fire!" A dozen voices repeated it, and a girl began to shriek hysterically.

There was a swift movement in the crowd, followed by a wild rush, and for the moment Adrian felt himself almost swept off his feet. Instinctively he tightened his hold on Constance's arm, as he strove to force a passage for her.

"It's all right," he said reassuringly. "We'll be out of this in a moment."

The girl's pale face alarmed him. For the moment he thought she was going to faint. He slipped one arm round her slim waist, and with the other forcibly held back a man who tried to rush in front.

Her hands tightened on his wrist. He could feel her tremble as she leaned against him.

"Don't be afraid," he cried, as he half lifted, half drew her through a gap.

She raised her face to his; a tinge of colour had crept back into it.

"I'm not afraid," she answered proudly—"not with you, Adrian."

A dozen steps more, and they were safely through the barrier. By good luck, an empty cab was passing at the moment. Adrian secured it, and ushering his companion hurriedly into it, gave the driver her address.

Constance was very silent on the journey. She shrank back into a corner with eyes half closed, but her hand rested in Adrian's. As for him, he asked for nothing better. The memory of her assurance that she trusted him beat itself rhythmically into the sound of the horse's hoofs.

"*I'm not afraid*," she had said—"*not with you, Adrian!*"

# XX

AT the door of the house in Park Grove Constance said good night, and went slowly up the gravelled walk, unconscious of her landlady's inquiring face pressed against the window. When she encountered her a moment later in the narrow hall, she would have passed her with a brief word had not the way been barred. The fact was, Mrs. Waggett viewed the manner of her lodger's return with strong disapproval. Hansom cabs and masculine escorts at an hour not far removed from midnight boded no good, in her opinion. There was no knowing, indeed, she considered, to what such "goings on" might not lead, and she stated her views on the subject with an uncompromising frankness.

Constance listened to her tirade, half amused and half angry. When she had explained the circumstances, however, the other immediately became apologetic.

"Which I wouldn't go so far as to 'int, Miss," she observed breathlessly, "that you didn't do exactly what was right; but one 'as to be careful all the same when one remembers what men—especially play-actors—are. It's a mercy you're both safe and sound, I'm sure; but the ways of Providence is unscrutable, aren't they? We're here to-day an' gone to-morrer, as the sayin' is. And no one should know this better than myself, 'aving buried four of my own, an' only drawn the insurance money twice. Still, it's a poor 'eart as never rejoices, an' if so be as you 'ad been called away, I've no doubt but we should meet again in another world."

"Possibly," returned Constance wearily; "but I had rather thought of going to heaven myself."

Then she took the candle which the talkative Mrs. Waggett handed her, and went upstairs. She wanted no more reminiscences just then: she had enough of her own.

When they met again at the rehearsal a couple of days later, Adrian found her somewhat uncommunicative. The remainder of the company, however, more than atoned for this. They sought his society, indeed, so assiduously that he began to wonder as to the reason. It was Miss Mortimer who enlightened him.

"Oh, you unkind man!" she exclaimed archly, "not to let poor little me into the secret."

"Which one?" he returned, fencing.

Miss Mortimer simpered, and sidled a little nearer to his chair.

"Why, that Mrs. Bellingham has commissioned you to do the alterations in 'Whitehall.' Mr. Antony told us all about it. Of course, you've made my part all right now, haven't you?"

"I hope you'll think so," returned Adrian diplomatically, but feeling rather uncomfortable as he remembered the attenuated proportions to which it had shrunk in the remodelling process.

"I trust yours truly hasn't been forgotten," called out Mr. Bedford. "I always said the comic part wanted working up. Indeed, I mentioned the matter to Elliott once, and he promised to think it over. A few more lines and some extra business would make all the difference."

Felix Keene, with a number of brown-paper-covered books under his arm, walked on to the stage. He looked round the expectant group, a grim smile hovering about the corners of his thin lips. It broadened into a meaning grin when he saw Adrian. Then he crossed to a small table set near the footlights and faced the company.

"Here are your new parts," he said. "Everybody is to be word-perfect by Saturday."

As he watched the recipients feverishly turn over the pages of their copies, Adrian prepared for a storm of expostula-

tion. It would have burst, he felt certain, but for the sudden arrival of Mrs. Bellingham.

"Good morning every one," she observed blandly. "Studying your parts already, I see. That's right. I shall expect a smooth rehearsal this morning. Now then, places please! Beginners for Act I."

Bedford, angrily crushing the typed sheets he was holding, rose from his seat as the others moved towards the wings.

"Well I'm damned!" he muttered. "Call this a part, indeed! It was something like one before. Now it's like nothing on earth."

Mrs. Bellingham looked up from the table, where she was having a whispered conversation with the stage manager.

"What's the matter, Mr. Bedford?" she inquired sweetly. "If the length of your part is troubling you I'll put it right directly. The fact is, on my way down here I remembered that there are another twenty lines that have to be cut out of it. Let me have the script please, and I'll do it at once. Any one else who wants alterations made must speak to Mr. Antony. He'll be here in a moment."

Swearing softly to himself, the comedian handed up the typed pages and saw them scored ruthlessly through with a blue pencil.

Constance, who had watched the little scene from the back of the stage, caught Adrian's anguished eye fixed on her, and smiled in sympathy.

"Don't look so alarmed," she whispered. "I shan't complain. I'm sure I don't want my part improved any further."

"It's not my fault," protested Adrian eagerly.

"I know it isn't," she answered softly. "Hush! here's Mr. Antony."

The rehearsal proceeded a good deal more smoothly than Adrian had anticipated. To his way of thinking, however, Mrs. Bellingham put a good deal of unnecessary warmth into her interpolated scene with him. Fortunately, no one else appeared to notice it, and after the first few minutes he him-

self decided that it was not worth bothering about. It would have been pleasanter, certainly, if—as he had originally intended—his stage partner had been Constance Assheton. He could have done more justice to the lines then, he felt. Failing her, however, Mrs. Bellingham was no bad substitute. It was rather annoying to come to this conclusion after all his high ideas on the subject, but there was no help for it. Despite his efforts to think otherwise he found it decidedly pleasant to have a superbly beautiful woman like Mrs. Bellingham to make love to him. He felt instinctively that all the other men were consumed with jealousy, and the knowledge was not distasteful.

"Well, I think this will do for to-day," announced Mrs. Bellingham, when at last they came to the end of the act. "Third and fourth scenes on Monday morning at eleven o'clock, please."

Then she swept away with a swish of silk skirts, talking in a low tone to Antony. The business manager escorted her to the stage door. As soon as he had seen her into the brougham that was waiting there, he turned slowly back again. Passing Adrian in the narrow passage, he stopped as if struck by a sudden thought.

"I want you to come up to my office, Mr. Merrick. There's a little matter that Mrs. Bellingham has just asked me to settle with you."

Rather wondering what was in store for him, Adrian followed the other up a flight of stairs and along a corridor leading to the front of the house. When he came to the end of it the manager unlocked an iron door that opened into his private room.

Antony sat down at his desk, and began to turn over the mass of papers there. Presently he found the one he was looking for.

"Well," he remarked, "about this little matter—I dare say you'd like to know what it is?"

"Certainly."

"It's this. Mr. Elliott mentioned to me the other day

that you'd written a one-act play called 'Fancy Free.' It appears that, without saying anything to you about it, he showed it to Mrs. Bellingham. As she thought rather well of it, and as we happen to want a curtain-raiser sometimes, I had a look at it myself last night."

Adrian tried hard to look unconcerned, but the effort was rather a failure.

"Do you think it will suit Mrs. Bellingham, then?"

Antony delivered himself of a sardonic chuckle.

"My dear Mr. Merrick, leading ladies who tour at the head of their own companies don't appear in one-act plays."

Adrian's face fell.

"No, I suppose not," he assented ruefully.

"But they're not all leading ladies in this company, although they think they ought to be," continued the other. "Mrs. Bellingham's idea is that some of the people in the present cast could be utilized. Let me see, it only wants two women and two men."

Adrian felt his spirits revive.

"Miss Assheton would be excellent in the part of the girl, Margaret," he began.

"I dare say. Mrs. Bellingham's opinion, however, was that Miss Mortimer would be better. Miss Assheton might play the governess, she thought, and with you for the hero and Bedford for the footman the cast would be complete. She wants you to call to-morrow afternoon, though, and talk it over with her."

Adrian walked back to his rooms treading on air. Obviously, he was in luck's way. The only thing that disturbed him at all was the reflection that he would probably experience some difficulty in getting the play cast in accordance with his own ideas. He had set his heart upon the leading rôle being sustained by Constance. With Miss Mortimer in the part it was another thing altogether. Still, he might be able to talk Mrs. Bellingham over, after all. At any rate, he would have a good try.

Mrs. Bellingham, he was agreeably surprised to find,

proved far more amenable than he had anticipated. It was about four o'clock when he arrived at Hans Place, and he found her studying a pile of correspondence that had been sent down from the theatre. The manner in which she flung it aside the moment he was announced was extremely flattering. He apologized for disturbing her, but she waved his protests away.

"Not a bit of it," she remarked brightly. "I'm only too glad to see you. I was getting so bored by these letters that I'd have welcomed a tax-collector. Have some tea and a cigarette while I put these bothering papers away."

She crossed the room to her writing-desk and came back a moment later holding up a thin square packet. Then, seating herself on a stool at his feet, she handed it to him triumphantly.

"Guess what I have here!"

Adrian's eyes glistened.

"It's my play. Mr. Antony told me you'd read it."

"Quite right. I read it yesterday. I like it, and I'm going to produce it."

"It's awfully good of you," exclaimed Adrian impulsively.

Mrs. Bellingham looked up quickly, a half smile on her face. The expression in her violet eyes deepened, and her breath came and went in little quick gasps. She leaned forward until one slim hand touched his.

"Not at all," she said softly. "I was interested in it because you wrote it. I'd play in it myself, only an actress of my standing can't very well appear in a curtain-raiser. Now, what are your ideas about the cast?"

Adrian determined to take the bull by the horns.

"I thought that Miss Assheton might play Margaret, and Miss Mortimer, or any one else you like, could be the governess. As for the men's parts—well, I think I could make something of Captain Stanhope, and perhaps Mr. Bedford would do for Jackson."

"H'm! Margaret is the girl, and Stanhope is the man she's in love with?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Bellingham became suddenly thoughtful, and affected to examine the pages before her with interest. Adrian felt, however, that she was thinking over his suggestion. Until she spoke again he was on tenterhooks of anxiety.

"Well," she said suddenly, "I don't see any objection."

Adrian's face betrayed his feelings.

"I'm most awfully grateful to you," he burst out.

"Pooh! I want the play to be a success. Perhaps some day you'll write one with a nice part for me in it?"

"I'd love to."

She looked at him steadily, a rosy flush spreading across her face. The pressure of the fingers that had been resting lightly on his deepened.

"It's nice to see such enthusiasm, my—friend. At times, though, I've a horrible thought that I'm growing old. Look, here's a wrinkle close to my mouth."

She raised her face as she spoke and leaned forward again until he could almost feel her quick breathing. The little catch in her voice alarmed him. Friendliness was one thing; this, however, was becoming almost embarrassing. He attempted to disengage his hand, but it was held too firmly.

"Well, is it a very ugly wrinkle indeed?"

He shook his head.

"Nonsense! It's only a smile that has slipped from its proper place."

Mrs. Bellingham laughed. Then she rose and made him a formal curtsey.

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick. You said that very nicely. I'm afraid you've had a lot of practice, though, in making pretty speeches."

# XXI

FROM a conversation, however, which he had with Antony the next day, Adrian discovered that his hopes of an immediate appearance as a dramatist were not to be realized. "You'll have to wait a bit," observed the manager. "The tour hasn't even started yet, and there are lots of matters to attend to in the meantime. We'll see about your little business in a month or two's time, perhaps."

Marchmont, when he learned that Adrian had secured no contract as to date of production, expressed himself candidly on the subject.

"You are a flat," was his uncomplimentary verdict, "not to have insisted on a written agreement. As you've got nothing in black and white, the whole arrangement might be repudiated at any moment. Mrs. Bellingham would wriggle out of anything—short of a cast-iron contract—if it suited her."

"Oh, there's no likelihood of that," rejoined Adrian airily.

"H'm! I wouldn't be too certain. Besides, my trusting young friend, you've got a Hebrew to deal with as well."

"Who do you mean?"

"Why, that cordial business manager at the Embankment, of course."

"Oh, you mean Antony? He never struck me as being a Jew."

"Well, if he isn't one he ought to bring a libel action against his nose."

"I'll suggest it. By the way, when shall I see you again? We start off on the famous tour next Sunday."

Marchmont examined his note-book reflectively.

"Saturday evening. Come and see my new diggings in the Temple. I've got two rooms and a bulge in Pump Court. They're rather chic."

Nothing more was said at the next rehearsal about the production of the curtain-raiser. Adrian put it down to the fact that the management had too many other matters to attend to, and strove to possess his soul in patience. As he was leaving the theatre, however, Mrs. Bellingham called him to her.

"I haven't had a chance of speaking to you yet this morning, Mr. Merrick," she exclaimed. "I wanted to tell you that that little business we were discussing the other day is practically settled now. The play will probably go into rehearsal either at Leeds or Bristol. Mr. Antony will settle all details. Come and see me about three o'clock this afternoon, and we'll talk over the whole matter thoroughly."

As she disappeared down the passage, Bedford, who had been listening eagerly to the conversation, sidled up to Adrian.

"Hullo, dear boy!" he exclaimed, with a geniality that was particularly offensive. "What's in the wind now? More plays?"

"It seems rather like it," returned Adrian shortly. Constance Assheton was leaving the theatre at that moment, and he wanted to speak to her.

The comedian, however, was not to be denied.

"Come and have a drink, old chap," he urged. "Or we might have a bit of lunch together at the club?"

Adrian began to get desperate, for he could see Miss Mortimer, with determination in her eye, hastening towards him from the wings.

"Thanks very much, but some other time, perhaps," he returned. "I've an appointment just now."

The comedian turned to Miss Mortimer, a malevolent grin spreading over his blotched face.

"No go, my dear. Our young friend isn't having any."

Miss Mortimer took no notice of the remark. She was

busy with her own thoughts. The reason of Adrian's hurried exit had just occurred to her.

"He's gone to speak to that little cat, Connie Assheton," she told herself angrily. "I might have guessed it when I saw him hurrying after her."

This, as a matter of fact, was exactly what had happened. As the stage door swung behind him, Adrian glanced eagerly up the street. Constance was just in sight, but he knew that on reaching the Strand she would probably get into a bus. He hurried forward accordingly, and overtook her.

"I was afraid you were too proud to speak to poor me," she remarked demurely.

"I didn't get a chance to do so in the theatre," he protested.

She turned swiftly on him.

"Did you want to?"

There was a faint tremor in her voice, but her eyes were fixed on him steadily enough.

"Of course I did. I had something to tell you. It's good news, and I think you'd like to hear it. If you're not in a hurry, let's go and sit down somewhere."

Constance reflected for a moment.

"I'm lunching with some uninteresting relatives of mine in South Kensington at two o'clock. We might sit in the Park for twenty minutes first."

Under the trees at the Knightsbridge end, with the red outline of the barracks peeping furtively through the thick interlacing boughs, they found a couple of vacant chairs. A great clump of rhododendrons stretched down to the edge of the tan-strewn path in front, and a thrush sang cheerily in an adjoining hawthorn bush. The noise of the traffic sweeping along the great thoroughfare facing them had sunk to a subdued murmur. The droning of a bee, indeed, as it flitted among the hyacinths that bordered the wide expanse of turf behind was more distinct. But for a stolid policeman sauntering across the gravel a little way ahead, it was difficult to realise that London was all round them.

Considering himself quite free to speak of Mrs. Bellingham's intentions so far as he was concerned, Adrian explained the position of affairs. The unaffected interest his companion showed in what he had to say was delightful. He felt that it was genuine, as was also her pleasure in his good fortune.

"I congratulate you heartily," she said when he had finished.

"Thank you. What I'm most pleased about, though, is the thought that you'll be in the piece. I'm sure you'll be splendid."

Constance looked suddenly grave.

"It's very nice of you to think of me for a part," she said slowly, "but——"

"But what?"

"Well, 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' you know."

"Oh, that's all right in this case."

The other's doubts, however, were not to be dispersed so easily.

"I'm sure I hope so. Still, it's a mistake to be too confident. You must remember that Mrs. Bellingham is inclined to change her mind rather suddenly. Because she says to-day that I can have this particular part, it doesn't follow at all that she won't say something else to-morrow."

"Oh, I don't think that need be feared," was the airy response.

Constance traced a pattern on the gravel with the point of her sunshade. Adrian, watching her closely, felt that something was troubling her. Suddenly she looked up.

"Look here," she said, "I'm going to tell you something. I dare say you know it already. Every one else at the theatre does. Mrs. Bellingham hates me, and I'm quite sure she wouldn't do anything to give me a helping hand unless it suited her."

The words startled Adrian out of his self-possession.

"Surely you don't mean that?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I do," she answered—and there was a bitterness in

her voice that was new to him. "You must have seen it for yourself. Everybody else in the company has."

"But I can't believe it."

Constance laughed, but it was not a very successful effort.

"Still, I'm afraid you'll have to—that is, if you keep your eyes open. The fact is, Mrs. Bellingham, like all actresses who happen to be in management for themselves, is intensely jealous of any one who can compete with her. Of course, it's absurd for any one to be jealous of me, but Mrs. Bellingham certainly is. It sounds horribly conceited of me to say this, but it's the truth all the same. I wish it weren't."

"But you're still in her company."

"Yes, but I never know when she won't get rid of me. She'd have done so long ago if I hadn't had a contract with her for the London season. My touring engagement is only a fortnightly one, and she can end it whenever she pleases by paying me two weeks' salary."

"Well, that's the case with me, too."

Constance smiled, in spite of the thoughts that were evidently troubling her.

"Yes, but you and I are not on quite the same footing in Mrs. Bellingham's estimation," she returned gently. "You can't possibly clash with her, you see."

When she left him a few minutes afterwards to keep her appointment, Adrian reflected seriously on what he had just heard. While honestly believing that Constance exaggerated the difficulties of her position in the company, he had, nevertheless, an uneasy feeling that Mrs. Bellingham was not favourably disposed towards her. He recollected the attitude she had adopted at the first rehearsal, and the memory of certain slighting remarks made by her on subsequent occasions at Miss Assheton's expense also troubled him. Still, her animosity could not be very serious, he reflected, since she had, after all, adopted his suggestion with regard to the casting of "Fancy Free." Having arrived at this comforting reflection, he decided that it was time to go down to Hans Place.

The cordiality of Mrs. Bellingham's greeting was a little embarrassing. Judging from the warmth of it, indeed, he might have been an intimate friend who had only just returned after a long absence. The manner, too, in which she retained his hand in hers made him uncomfortable. It scarcely savoured of that desire she had professed to discuss business. Indeed, for the first five minutes she avoided the subject of his visit altogether, and insisted upon talking of matters that had nothing to do with it. Adrian's growing impatience was evidently written on his face, for the other suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence and took him to task.

"My dear Mr. Merrick," she exclaimed, "what on earth are you looking so gloomy about? It almost appears as though you weren't glad to see me."

"Of course I am, but——"

"But what?"

"Well, I'm very anxious to talk over the play with you."

"And so am I. That's what I asked you to come for this afternoon. Well, I won't try your patience any longer. I like the little piece, and I've made up my mind to produce it on tour. If it turns out all right, I'll bring it back to London later on. There now, what do you say to that?"

"I'm awfully obliged to you. What about the cast, though?"

"Oh, I thought we'd settled that," was the careless reply. "Let me see—yourself for Captain Stanhope—Miss Mortimer for Margaret—Miss Assheton for the governess—and—oh—yes—Mr. Bedford for the footman. Well, I think that will do very nicely. Can you suggest any improvement?"

"Miss Assheton ought to be Margaret. You approved of her the other day."

Mrs. Bellingham glanced up quickly. Her scrutiny made Adrian colour uneasily.

"Why are you so bent on that?" she demanded. "Oh, well, have it your own way," she added carelessly. "After all, it's only a trifling part."

Adrian, his point gained, did not feel inclined to argue.

"Thank you," he returned. "It's very kind of you to accept the play at all."

Mrs. Bellingham's face softened.

"Surely one can do a little thing like that for—well—for friendship's sake," she observed. "Of course," she went on quickly, as she noted the other's expression and correctly interpreted it, "I'm accepting the play on its merits—I'm a business woman, you know—but, at the same time, a little personal feeling may come into it. Now, is there any other point to discuss?"

Adrian took this for a polite intimation that the interview was over.

"I don't think so," he replied as he rose. Suddenly Marchmont's warning words recurred to him, and he hesitated.

"Well?" inquired his hostess blandly. There was a strained expression on her face, however, that made him feel a little uncomfortable.

"Oughtn't I to have a written agreement or something?" he stammered nervously.

Mrs. Bellingham looked at him reproachfully.

"Surely, Mr. Merrick, that's not necessary—between friends—is it?"

Adrian felt himself blushing furiously.

"Not at all," he stammered; "only I thought it was usual."

"Of course, you can have one if you're set on it. Written agreements are so horribly prosaic, though. They quite destroy all pleasant relationships, and I'm sure you wouldn't like that. Still, I don't mind risking it, and getting one drawn up for you."

"Please don't," said Adrian, heartily wishing that he had never mentioned the subject. "I should only put it in the fire if I had it."

Mrs. Bellingham regarded him with a radiant smile.

"Well, it's certainly nice to feel that one is trusted," she

said softly. At the caressing cadence in her voice Adrian experienced anew the sensation of vague uneasiness that sometimes assailed him when he was alone with her. He would have risen to go, but she stopped him.

"Have another cup of tea first, and afterwards I want to hear your opinion of a new nocturne that was sent to me the other day."

"Thanks!" he returned. "I love music."

"So do I. Music is the food of love, you know."

"I'm afraid that Cupid must suffer a good deal from indigestion at times, then."

Mrs. Bellingham shook her head reprovingly.

"You mustn't joke about important matters. Now come and turn over the music for me."

Adrian followed her across the room to the piano. Her eyes rested on him approvingly as he raised the lid.

"What nice clothes you wear," she said. "Do you know, one of my greatest difficulties is to get the men of my company to go to decent tailors. Sometimes I think I'll be obliged to advertise as touring managers do in the 'Era'—'Wanted, actors capable of parts. Must dress well on and off.' Of course, one doesn't expect people like Mr. Bedford and Mr. Montagu to be properly turned out. Even Mr. Hood, however, gives himself away at times. For example, he has an extraordinary idea that a dress suit isn't complete without a red silk handkerchief tucked into the waistcoat opening. You'll see some much more weird effects, though, when the company start off from Victoria next Sunday. Bring a pair of smoked glasses with you, or else your eyesight will be dazzled!"

# XXII

SUNDAY morning dawned fine and warm. The sky was cloudless, and the soft scented air of the Park blowing in at his windows seemed specially fresh and sweet. It was a good augury, thought Adrian, of the tour that was about to commence. The prospect of a week at the seaside appealed to him strongly, and he felt quite impatient to start. As he skimmed through "Footlight Bits" while breakfasting, a paragraph, headed "On the Road," caught his eye. "A special train," it ran, "will leave Victoria at 10 a.m. this morning, conveying Mrs. Bellingham and company, from the Embankment Theatre, to Brighton, where they open an extended provincial engagement in the popular costume-drama 'Whitehall.' The artistes engaged by Mrs. Bellingham include Miss Stella Mortimer, Miss Mabel Warren, Miss Constance Assheton, Mr. Aubrey Hood, Mr. Adrian Merrick, and Mr. Thomas Bedford, all of whom sustain their original parts. The tour will be under the general supervision of Mr. James Antony, the courteous and popular director of the Embankment Theatre, while Mr. George Gunning will travel with the company as business manager. The superintendence of the stage will, as hitherto, be in the able hands of Mr. Felix Keene."

"While they were about it," laughed Adrian, "they might have mentioned the call boy's name as well. I'll keep the paragraph; it might come in useful as evidence that I really am an 'artiste.'"

When he arrived at Victoria and observed his travelling companions assembled on the platform, he decided that Mrs. Bellingham's remarks were not entirely unjustified. Nearly

all the men, for example, affected soft hats, and bright yellow boots were also evidently *de rigueur*. Despite the heat, both Aubrey Hood and Keene wore long Inverness capes, while Gunning—a brisk-looking individual whom he now saw for the first time—strolled up and down in a check suit of quite startling design and a straw hat with an M.C.C. riband. Bedford, with a praiseworthy ambition to suggest both Sunday and the seaside, had arrayed himself in a black tail coat and a pair of flannel trousers. Standing beside the train could be seen Raphael Montagu. He was talking to the stage manager, and wore a yatching-cap and knickerbockers.

Marchmont, who had come to see him off, smiled broadly as he noted the group.

"Rum-looking lot your barnstorming friends, old chap!" he remarked. "The genius who designed their kit must have suffered from ophthalmia. Hood's necktie would stop an express train."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," returned Adrian. "I must get one, too, in order to look like an actor."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't try if I were you."

"We're lucky in having a fine day to start our tour on," remarked Constance, coming up the next moment. "I hope it will continue like this all the week. Brighton's rather a deadly place when it rains."

"Here is Mr. Gunning," exclaimed Stella. "He looks as though he'd bought the station."

As she spoke the business manager, his hands full of railway tickets and an air of importance on his face, came bustling towards them.

"Take your places, please, ladies and gentlemen," he called out, "we're going to start in a moment. Miss Mortimer and Miss Assheton, you two travel together. I've put you with Mr. Bedford, Mr. Merrick."

"Where's Mrs. Bellingham?" inquired Marchmont. "I haven't seen that distinguished leading lady yet."

"She doesn't condescend to trek with us," replied Gunning.

"She's motoring down with some of her Smart Set friends, I believe. Now then, come along everybody!"

Adrian looked at the train, curious to ascertain what difference there was between a theatrical one and any others. So far as he could see, however, there was none, save for the fact that a label was pasted on each carriage window to show who was to occupy it, while on the door of every compartment was a printed slip, marked, "Reserved for Mrs. Bellingham's 'Whitehall' Company." For the most part the carriages held two persons, but Aubrey Hood had one to himself, and the business manager, he noted, also travelled in solitary state. At the further end of the train the "extra" ladies and gentlemen, together with the stage hands and carpenters, were accommodated. A couple of large trucks, covered with tarpaulin, carried the scenery.

On the recommendation of Godfrey Deane, who had interested himself in the matter, Adrian had engaged rooms in advance in a house just off the King's Road. He would have gone to an hotel for choice, but he felt that however small and unpretentious the establishment selected, the remainder of the company would have regarded his living there as a piece of ostentation. As it was, his decision to live alone, instead of following the general example and sharing expenses with some one else, had attracted a certain amount of unfavourable comment.

Mrs. Blades, the landlady, welcomed him effusively, and made many inquiries after Deane, who, it appeared, had stopped in the house on several occasions. When she learned that he was no longer a member of the company the good soul seemed quite upset.

"As pleasant spoken a young gentleman as ever I come across, sir," she observed. "I do wish, though, he'd take up some other line of business."

"Why?"

"Because he's too much of a gentleman to be a play-actor, sir. Of course, and meaning no offence to you, sir, there are respectable people in the Profession, but they're few an' far

between, as the saying is. Now, if you think of going down to the pier for a stroll I'll get your dinner ready against the time you'll be back."

Adrian felt a little depressed. Nobody—except the people themselves—appeared to have a good word to say for actors and actresses. They seemed to be regarded as outcasts, and as only to be received on sufferance by those who followed other pursuits. There was no reason for it, and it was grossly unfair. The Stage, although it might have its drawbacks, was at any rate quite as respectable a calling as any of the other Arts. What annoyed him particularly was the want of loyalty towards their work displayed by so many of those with whom he had come into contact since his debut. Bedford, for example, always spoke of actors as "mummers," and even Hood himself seldom lost an opportunity of referring to them in some slighting fashion. Harrison Elliott's uncomplimentary views also occurred to him. As for dressers and stage hands generally, their contempt for the Theatre and everything connected therewith was proverbial. He had once unburdened his mind to Godfrey Deane on the subject, but without obtaining any satisfactory explanation.

"My dear chap," he had been airily informed, "just as no man is a hero to his valet, you may be jolly sure that no actor is anything at all to his dresser. After you with the grease paint."

A keen wind, with the salt stinging breath of the sea in it, blowing across the blue waves, soon swept more cheerful thoughts into his mind. By the time he reached the West Pier he was feeling quite like himself again.

Just opposite the Metropole he met Aubrey Hood. Not being particularly inclined for his society just then he would have avoided him, but the leading man was so effusive that there was no possibility of doing so. They walked on together, accordingly, towards the Lawns, and then retraced their steps to the pier.

"It's a pity Brighton's so overrun with bounders who come down for the week-end," observed Hood complacently.

"The place is chock-full of Hebrews, too, on Sundays. I went into the Metropole just now for a drink, and even the waiters were talking Yiddish."

As they strolled along the pier Adrian saw, from the admiring glances cast towards him by a couple of young women whom they passed, that his companion was recognised. "That's Aubrey Hood," he heard one of them exclaim in an awed whisper. "He's acting at the Royal this week. Isn't he handsome?"

"I'm going to send him my album, and ask him to write his name in it, Gladys," remarked the other.

Hood smiled as he passed their seat.

"Silly little idiots!" he observed pityingly. "I'll bet you that when I go down to the theatre I'll find a stack of picture postcards waiting there for me to sign. Hullo!" he added, quickening his pace as he spoke, "there's Connie. Looks rather fetching in that get-up, doesn't she?"

Adrian glanced eagerly in the direction indicated. Leaning over the rail, watching the waves, he saw Constance. She made a charming picture, he thought, in her fresh muslin dress and shady hat trimmed with cornflowers. Hood's familiarity grated on him, and he longed for the right to resent it.

Constance turned at the sound of their footsteps. Her face lighted up as she saw who were coming.

"I was just beginning to get bored," she said. "Indeed, I must have looked as though I were meditating suicide, for five minutes ago a Salvation Army lady gave me a tract. I passed it on to a friendly seagull."

"You're in luck!" laughed Hood. "All I ever get given me is the hump. This is the eleventh visit I've paid to Brighton in the last three years, and I'm about tired of the place by now."

He sat down beside her with an easy assurance of being welcome that made Adrian look at him in astonishment. Constance noted the expression on his face, and shot a meaning smile towards him.

"There's plenty of room for us all, Mr. Merrick," she said. "The trippers will come out in force presently, and then there won't be a square inch anywhere."

As was his custom, Hood monopolized most of the conversation. He talked in a loud tone, interlarding his remarks with scraps of theatrical slang, obviously bent on impressing a trio of young women who were sitting just behind him. Adrian felt himself growing hot all over, and looked at Constance to see what she thought of it. Her face was perfectly grave, but there was a gleam of amusement in her eye that showed him plainly that her views were not those of the remainder of the audience.

Presently Hood pulled out his watch.

"Well, I must be off now," he declared, speaking, as before, for the benefit of the eager listeners behind. "I'm lunching at the Bedford with the Burlinghames—Lord and Lady Burlinghame, you know—old friends of mine. It's an awful bore, but they insist on my looking them up whenever I'm down here. We'll all meet at the theatre to-morrow. There might be a rehearsal in the morning."

As he swept off his hat with an exaggerated bow and sauntered slowly away, the trio in the adjoining row of chairs nudged one another excitedly.

"I was sure that was Aubrey Hood," Adrian heard one of them say. "He's quite as good-looking off the stage as he is on. I'm glad we made mother get seats for the dress circle."

Adrian sat talking with Constance for another half-hour or more. She seemed in excellent spirits. He had never seen her so animated before. The time slipped by without either of them noticing its flight. At last, however, the deserted state of the pier recalled them to the fact that it must be getting late.

Constance glanced at her watch and started.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed, "it's just on half-past two, and I said I'd have luncheon at two sharp. My rooms are in Grove Crescent, out towards the Rottingdean end. The

imaginative landlady there described them as being ten minutes from the West Pier, but I fancy she must have meant by motor."

Adrian escorted her to the door, declaring, in answer to her protestations, that his own meal was not ordered to be ready until he returned. He would have been pleased if the distance had been twice as far. When he summoned up courage to say so, Constance laughed. There was a tell-tale colour in her cheeks, however, that did not escape his quick eyes. As he walked back to Mrs. Blades's house, the sea whispered all sorts of pleasant things to him.

The recollection that Constance had announced her intention to take a stroll along the front before breakfast made him rise early the next morning. His landlady expressed much surprise when she met him on the stairs shortly after eight o'clock, and seemed to think that he must be unwell, so solicitously did she inquire after his health.

"I've been doing for acting gentlemen ever since I've lived in Brighton, Mrs. Smith," she observed to a neighbour, "and I never yet knew one as would get up before midday, unless it was to go to rehearsal."

"I expect he's a little bit off the top, ma'am," returned the landlady from the next door, "or else he's new to the profesh. There's another gent from the theayter—Mr. Bedford, his name is—lodging with me. I asked him what he wanted for breakfast, and he said two bottles of soda water. Lord, but he can shift his liquor!" she added with evident pride. "There's nothing but the cork left from what 'e got through last night."

Adrian, happily unconscious of the criticism he was arousing, hastened down to the beach. His search, however, was fruitless, for none of the few pedestrians there bore the slightest resemblance to the one he wanted to see. He made up his mind, accordingly, to abandon the attempt, and began the return journey. Near the Aquarium he stopped for a moment to watch a gull circling in the still, lambent air. There was something in the easy grace of its movements that

reminded him a little of Constance. As he walked through the Old Steyn Gardens a minute or two later he came suddenly upon her sitting under a tree.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming here?" he inquired.

"I don't remember that you asked me," she replied demurely.

"Will you be here at the same time to-morrow morning?"

"Perhaps," was the reply, and with that he had to be content.

They sat beneath the branches of a giant elm, talking of nothing in particular, but apparently quite satisfied with one another's society. Adrian, for his part, certainly felt that he would not have changed places with any one.

Presently, the deep booming of a clock rang out. They counted the strokes together. There were nine of them.

"It's high time we both went off to breakfast," declared Constance. "I suppose you'll be going down to the theatre about half-past eleven?"

"Certainly," said Adrian, although it had not occurred to him to do anything of the sort. "We shall meet there again, then?"

"Yes; you'll find everybody rallying round the baggage men, and quarrelling with Mr. Keene about the way the dressing-rooms are allotted. For the first week or two of a tour, one-half of a company isn't on speaking terms with the other one."

After a leisurely breakfast Adrian set out for the theatre. It took him some little time to discover the stage door, for it was hidden away in a side street at the back, coyly sandwiched between a couple of small shops. The familiar figure, however, of one of the baggage men, leaning reposefully up against it and studying a poster, reassured him.

Only a few people were on the stage when he made his way there. Conspicuous among them was Felix Keene, under whose superintendence the scenery was being brought in through a long narrow slit in the back wall. A gang of

shirt-sleeved carpenters looked on apathetically, while a couple of electricians fixed long sinuous coils of wire to such strips of canvas as had already been placed in position. A row of coloured lamps glimmered feebly along the top of the proscenium opening, and a line of gas jets hissed and flared in front of the orchestra. After the brilliancy of the sun outside, the whole place had a somewhat cheerless look, which the linen-shrouded stalls in the darkened auditorium intensified.

Pinned to the side of the big switchboard was a piece of foolscap. It was signed by Keene, and ran as follows:—

"WHITEHALL." MRS. BELLINGHAM'S CO.
LIGHT PLOT (ELECTRICS)

*Act I. Amber foots to commence, full up. Front border, inside ceiling, three-quarters only (reds and blues). Blue lengths in openings P.S. and O. Pink backing to window L.C.*

It might have been written in Greek for all that Adrian could make of it. As he read it over a second time, Mrs. Bellingham, talking to Gunning, came through the wings. A heavy frown was on her face, but it lightened immediately when she saw him. She shook hands warmly, and nodded curtly towards Hood, with whom he was chatting. The leading man flushed angrily, and walked off to console himself with Miss Mortimer, who was standing at the back of the stage.

"It's a bit thick," he said indignantly, "when a man of my position is passed over for a beginner like young Merrick. Mrs. Bellingham never has a civil word for any one else now."

"You needn't upset yourself, my dear Aubrey," was the soothing response. "I'll bet you she'll get tired of him before very long. Master Adrian's not the only pebble on the beach."

"Well, she seems to think he is," returned the other moodily. "I'm about fed up with the way things are going in this company."

Miss Warren, who played a small part and understudied

Constance, glanced up with a pensive expression from a novelette which she had been reading.

"I wonder what Mrs. Bellingham was looking so black about a moment ago?" she observed.

"I expect it's because the booking isn't anything very great," replied Stella. "I heard her talking to Gunning about it just now when I went round to the box-office to see if my photos were properly displayed."

"If business is bad, we'll have to look out for squalls," observed Miss Warren philosophically. Then she went back to her novelette, and soon became lost in its fascinations.

Although the company, as a whole, affected to regard "Whitehall" as not likely to prove very attractive to Brighton playgoers, it was evident from the state of the house when the curtain went up that night that their gloomy predictions were not well founded. The audience was a large and enthusiastic one, and the piece went excellently. Mrs. Bellingham met with quite a reception when she made her first appearance, and there were loud calls for the principals after each act.

About half-way through the performance Bedford, perspiring under his grease paint, entered the dressing-room which he shared with Adrian. He took a bottle of beer from the basket where his stage wardrobe was kept, and then began to search among the contents of his make-up box for a corkscrew.

"That's better!" he exclaimed, when he had poured himself out a glass and drunk it off at a draught. "The blooming show is going A1 to-night, young-fellow-my-lad! I thought I'd fetch 'em with that little business of mine at the end of the act. They simply eat it!"

"I fancied it was Miss Assheton they were cheering," observed Adrian blandly.

The comedian scowled.

"Well, it wasn't," he returned shortly. "Hullo! there's that infernal call boy singing out for the next act."

# XXIII

WITH breakfast the next morning Mrs. Blades brought up a collection of newspapers, which she deposited on the table with an air of conscious pride.

"There are some beautiful notices here, sir," she remarked, as she put the tray down.

"Notices!" echoed Adrian blankly. "What about?" He was thinking of his walk back from the theatre last night under the stars with Constance, and he had no thoughts for anything else just then.

The landlady regarded him with an anxious expression. Such a lodger was a distinct novelty. An actor who got up at seven o'clock and took no interest in dramatic criticisms of the piece he was connected with could not be quite sane.

"Notices of the play, sir, at the Royal," she explained. "My Milly was there last night—in the upper circle—with the young gentleman from the baker's and another lady friend. She said Mr. Aubrey Hood was beautiful. He made her cry like anything!"

With a rush Adrian came back to more prosaic matters.

"Oh, ah! notices of the play. Yes, of course. Thanks very much. I shall be glad to read them."

As soon as he was alone he turned to the pile of papers, eager to see what they said about Constance. With regard to the impression which he himself had created he was not at all curious. That could wait.

The performance as a whole had evidently been to the taste of the critics. All the accounts, at any rate, were most favourable. Indeed, so exceedingly laudatory were they, that

Adrian began to think that both the play and the company interpreting it must be very much better than he had hitherto considered them. Perhaps, however, the Brighton experts were less exacting than the London ones. The first notice he read was set out in flaring headlines, and ran to over two columns. The cross-titles rather amused him—"Mrs. Bellingham, the Bernhardt of Britain"—"Powerful London Company"—"Absorbing Play"—"Lavish Scenic Accessories"—and "Brighton Endorses London's Verdict"—were a few of them. A second and more enterprising sheet devoted a full page to an interview with Mrs. Bellingham, headed "A Chat with a Distinguished West End Actress," while a third printed a photograph of the lady at the end of a long account of her histrionic career. In a fourth paper he came across a libellous portrait of Constance, to which were appended half a dozen lines of appreciation. He cut the page out and put it carefully away. Only one journal had a reference to himself. It was rather patronizing in tone. He kept it, however, as he thought that it might perhaps interest Marchmont. After Mrs. Bellingham, Aubrey Hood seemed to have attracted most attention. One enthusiastic writer, indeed, referred to him as "the personification of courtly bearing," while a second gave him nearly a whole column of undiluted praise. Miss Mortimer came off rather badly, all the notices dealing with her performance being of a somewhat lukewarm nature.

"I'm afraid the fair Stella won't be particularly pleased," thought Adrian as he swept the papers aside and got ready to go out.

He was rather later than usual in arriving at the theatre that night. As he walked down the passage leading from the stage door he met Constance. She was coming out of Mrs. Bellingham's room at the moment, and her face had a troubled look on it. He stopped for a moment to speak to her.

"I suppose you've seen all to-day's papers, Miss Asshe-

ton?" he remarked. "You had a very good notice in one of them."

"Yes," she replied, "I'm sorry to say I had."

He looked up in surprise.

"Sorry? Why?"

"Because there are times," she answered rather bitterly, "when good notices do more harm than bad ones."

Adrian turned into his dressing-room, wondering what this cryptic utterance meant. He was soon to be enlightened.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Bedford. "Seen Mrs. B. to-night? She's in a first-class rage, I can tell you."

"What about? Her notices are all right, aren't they? There's enough unadulterated gush in them to suit half a dozen leading ladies. The rest of the company, too, seem to have pleased the papers. I'd no idea we were all so clever."

The comedian turned round from the wig which he was brushing at the moment.

"Bless your innocence!" he observed. "That's just where the trouble is. Mrs. Bellingham has a weird idea that no one but her charming self should ever get more than two or three lines of decent criticism. Well, some newspaper chap, who, I suppose, wanted to do her a good turn, gave Connie Assheton half a column. It was only in some wretched little rag—'Brighton Bits,' or some such name—and Mrs. Bellingham wouldn't have seen it if some one hadn't been spiteful enough to send her a marked copy. The dresser tells me she was furious, and has been giving our young friend the rough side of her tongue."

"Who sent the paper?" demanded Adrian with sudden interest.

"Ask me another, dear boy. You may be pretty sure, though, that it was one of the ladies, and one who had a bad notice herself. Women are jealous creatures to one another, you know. If you ask me for my private opinion, though, I should say that Stella Mortimer knows as much about it as anybody else."

The same idea was in Adrian's mind, but in the absence of

any direct proof he scarcely liked to harbour it for a moment. A circumstance that arose later on that night, however, made his suspicions a certainty.

He was going back to his rooms after the performance, when he entered a little newsvendor's shop close to the theatre and asked for a copy of the paper in question.

"I haven't got a 'Brighton Bits' left, sir," said the shopman. "I only take in one copy, and I sold that to a lady at the theatre first thing this morning. What makes me remember it is that I lent her a pencil to mark one of the pages with."

Adrian pricked up his ears.

"Indeed! I don't suppose you know who the lady was, do you?"

"Certainly I do. She was Miss Mortimer. I have seen her at the Royal often. Perhaps you've seen her yourself, sir?"

Adrian walked away, scarcely able to credit what he had just heard. It seemed impossible that any one could be guilty of such unspeakable meanness—and to Constance, too, of all people! As for Mrs. Bellingham's conduct in the matter, it was simply childish. He would not have believed her capable of descending to such pettiness but for the occurrence of certain little incidents during the last week or two which had given him considerable insight into her character. He had an uneasy suspicion, however, that there were still further depths to be plumbed.

It was a couple of days later before an opportunity of speaking to Constance on the subject presented itself. He met her as he was walking across the downs one afternoon.

She shook her head at the first words.

"Please don't talk about that," she said. "It doesn't matter a bit, really. Besides, it has all blown over long ago. Mrs. Bellingham happened to be in a bad temper at the time, and it was my misfortune to have to bear the brunt of it. She has been charming to me ever since."

But Adrian was not to be put off so easily.

"Do you know who sent her the marked copy of the paper?" he asked.

Constance became suddenly grave.

"I'm not positively certain, but I think I could make a very good guess."

"So do I," said Adrian, and with that the subject dropped.

The week flew by rapidly, and withal pleasantly enough. The weather was delightful; long days of brilliant sunshine and warm moonlight nights that brought back a memory of South Africa. Under the influence of liberal public support, Mrs. Bellingham quite recovered her spirits and smiled impartially on every one. She could be very charming when she pleased, and Adrian sometimes found himself wondering at the complexity of her character. It seemed impossible that the same individual would dismiss an unfortunate stage hand one moment for some trifling hitch, while five minutes later she would tell her dresser to send some hot-house grapes to a scene shifter's sick wife. Yet he had known her to do both these things.

"She's a regular cough-drop, she is," he heard the call boy remark confidentially to a baggage man one night. "Sometimes you'd think that butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and at others she'll call you all the names she can lay her tongue to. It's a licker to me where she could have learned some of them. I got a rare old dressing down from her last night for being 'arf a minute late in telling her the curtain had gone up. It makes a man inclined to chuck the Profession."

During the last three days of the company's stay in Brighton, Adrian rather avoided Mrs. Bellingham. He had an impression that she would ask him to go and see her at her hotel if he gave her an opportunity, and he wanted to be as much as possible with Miss Assheton. One way and another, he managed to see a good deal of Constance, and they spent hours together in the open air, generally on the downs near Rottingdean. Sometimes, however, they would drive out towards Arundel or Worthing, and get back only just in

time for the evening performance. The intimacy between them deepened rapidly, and developed—on Adrian's part, at any rate, and almost before he quite realized it—into something warmer. From the very first Constance had attracted him strongly. No one had ever appealed to him as she had. She was so pretty, so fresh, and dainty, and gracious, and so entirely different from every one else. Sometimes he contrasted her mentally with the other members of the company —with Mrs. Bellingham, with Stella Mortimer, and with Mabel Warren. The difference between them was almost ludicrous. In mere beauty—in regularity of feature and quality of colouring—Mrs. Bellingham was no doubt the more richly endowed, but there the superiority ended. What she lacked in grace and tenderness and charm of disposition, Constance possessed to the full. As for Miss Mortimer and Miss Warren, they were merely a couple of over-dressed, vulgar young women with hopelessly suburban ideals. It was absurd to compare them with her even.

On the Saturday afternoon preceding the company's departure, Adrian arranged to take Constance for a long drive out into the country. Shortly before the time at which they were to start he came round to her rooms, a heavy frown on his brow. He looked so upset, indeed, that she felt quite alarmed.

"What on earth is the matter?" she demanded.

He took a note from his pocket and held it out.

"Mrs. Bellingham has just sent this round by a messenger. Listen to what she says:—

METROPOLE HOTEL,
*Friday.*

MY DEAR MR. MERRICK,

I want to see you particularly. Pray come round here at once. I've lots to talk about.

Very sincerely yours,
GRACE BELLINGHAM.

What do you think of it?"

Constance pursed up her lips.

"Well, Mrs. Bellingham seems remarkably—er—cordial. Does she always write to you like this?"

Adrian laughed in spite of his annoyance.

"No, she's not usually so formal. Seriously, though, what ought I to do? If I go, it will mean giving up my afternoon with you, and I'd hate to do that."

A warm colour glowed in the other's cheeks.

"Would you mind it very much?"

He raised his face to hers and looked at her steadily.

"Yes," he answered slowly, "very much indeed."

A sudden gleam leapt into her eyes, but her voice had no tremor in it.

"You must go," she said. "I dare say Mrs. Bellingham wants to talk business with you. It might be about the curtain-raiser, you know. You can't afford to throw away the chance."

"I don't want to," he returned. "This means a good deal to me."

When he reached the hotel he was shown up into a private sitting-room. Mrs. Bellingham was out at the moment, so the waiter informed him, but had left word that she would be back soon. He sat down and waited impatiently, wishing that he had not taken the trouble to come. Half a dozen times he was on the point of leaving, but each time something restrained him. At last, after what seemed an eternity, the door opened, and Mrs. Bellingham sailed into the room. Before the look of contrition on her face his anger began to fade away.

"I'm so fearfully sorry to have kept you waiting," she exclaimed. "Pray forgive me. It wasn't altogether my fault, though. The fact is, I went motoring with some friends, and the horrid thing took it into its head to break down. You must come out again with me some afternoon. Do you remember our first expedition together? Please don't say you've forgotten it!"

The pleading tone of her voice tore away the last barrier of his resentment.

"No, I remember," he answered. "What is it you wanted to see me about, though?"

Mrs. Bellingham sighed pensively.

"Oh, nothing very particular. I just wanted to have a chat with you. I never seem to have an opportunity now. This hotel bores me to extinction."

She sighed again, and, breaking off suddenly, turned her face away.

Adrian's sense of annoyance came back a hundredfold. He felt that he had merely been sent for to relieve the tedium of a dull hour.

"I wish you had said that in your note, then," he replied stiffly, his thoughts flying back to the plans he had made for spending the afternoon.

Mrs. Bellingham's violet eyes clouded. One slim hand straying idly over the back of a chair touched his. He would have moved it away, but the soft pressure suddenly deepened. Her face worked strangely, and a note came into her voice that he had not heard before. The hint of passion in it was unmistakable. Its strained intensity almost frightened him.

"Don't be angry with poor me—Adrian."

He turned and looked at her steadily, striving hard to collect himself. His thoughts were in a whirl. A noise as of a thousand hammers beat into his brain. It was only the ticking of a clock on the mantelpiece, but for the moment he failed to recognize it.

With an effort he found his voice.

"Please don't think that I'm angry," he protested.

She lifted a white, wan face, from which all the colour had gone out. Her eyes met his, and held him as with chains. Their burning glance seemed to be trying to read into the very depths of his soul. Her whole body was shaken with emotion. He could feel her hands tremble. She shivered slightly and leaned forward, a gesture of invitation in the movement. He tried to disengage himself, but her soft arms stole round his neck and tightened there.

Almost before he quite realized it, she drew him down to her and kissed him passionately on the lips.

"There—that's better!" she said, with a sigh of content, as she leaned back and looked at him through half-closed eyelids. "Now we're friends again."

Her self-possession filled him with mingled wonder and admiration. He turned to her as in a dream, and was met with a radiant smile.

"Well, say something," she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders and looked away. It was impossible to treat her like an ordinary woman. His thoughts were still in a whirl. As he tried to collect them there came a sudden knock at the door.

Mrs. Bellingham picked up a book and moved swiftly to a chair beside the fireplace.

"Come in!" she called out, in a matter-of-fact tone.

The door opened and a waiter entered.

"Mr. Antony to see you, madam," he announced.

"What a bore!" she returned calmly.

Adrian seized the chance.

"I'd better go," he said.

"Perhaps you had," was the nonchalant reply. "I quite forgot I'd asked Antony to come down this afternoon. He wants to talk business, and he'll probably stop for hours."

She gave him her hand. It rested in his without a tremor.

# XXIV

AT the theatre that night Mrs. Bellingham greeted Adrian as though the episode of the afternoon had never occurred. Her self-control filled him with amazement. Neither by word nor look did she suggest for a moment that he was anything more to her than the most casual acquaintance. Her attitude puzzled him, and at first he felt rather inclined to resent it. Finally, however, he decided that it was the best that could be observed for his own comfort.

"Well, how did you get on this afternoon?" inquired Constance, during one of the brief intervals between the acts. "Was it anything very important that Mrs. Bellingham had to say to you?"

He hesitated for a moment, not quite knowing how to answer. Constance smiled mischievously as she noted his anxiety to avoid the subject.

"I'm sure it was," she went on. "You're actually blushing! If you don't tell me at once I shall believe the worst."

"It's a good working rule," observed Hood coolly, "to blush at everything Mrs. Bellingham says. I've no doubt that Mr. Merrick will corroborate me."

He was about to protest when, to his relief, Keene interposed.

"Not so much talking in the wings, please. I'm going to ring up directly. Now then, stand by every one for the curtain."

As soon as the performance was over Adrian hurried back to his rooms. The company was making an early start the following morning, and he had a good deal of packing to do. The next town on the list was Bristol, and as the train call

had been fixed for ten o'clock he would have to breakfast early.

He found the company assembled at the station, with Gunning, looking more consequential than ever, in charge. A small crowd of interested spectators had gathered to see them off. For the most part it was made up of young women, who stared at the travellers in undisguised admiration. Conspicuous among the group, Adrian observed the trio he had noticed on the pier the previous Sunday afternoon. The chief object of their interest seemed, as before, to be Aubrey Hood, who walked languidly up and down the platform with a volume of Shakespeare under his arm. Their eyes followed him hungrily, and they nudged one another excitedly whenever he happened to come near them. The self-satisfaction on his face disgusted Adrian. He turned to Bedford for relief. Vulgar as the little comedian was, his personality did not offend him so much.

"What sort of a place is Bristol?" he asked.

"Not half bad. We ought to do a decent week there. I'm a bit of a local favourite, you know, as I've been in the panto at the Prince's for the last two years running. If the management had any sense they'd bill me. I wonder if you saw my Press notices?"

"I'm afraid I missed them," returned Adrian gravely.

"Ah, that's the worst of living in these outlandish parts. I don't suppose you ever saw a 'Referee' all the time you were in South Africa?"

The house in which Adrian had engaged his rooms for the Bristol week was at the Clifton end of the town, and within a few minutes' walk of the theatre. He was rather late in arriving there, for when they reached the station Miss Mortimer had asked him to find her a cab. The air of proprietorship with which she put the request was extremely marked, and he felt that she assumed it purposely in order to annoy Constance, who happened to be standing by at the moment. He wondered why Hood, who was her recognized cavalier, had not put himself forward.

When at length he descended from his own cab, a surprise awaited him. There was some theatrical-looking luggage stacked in the hall, and one of the trunks, with a long Inverness cape lying across it, had a vaguely familiar appearance. The landlady noted his glance of inquiry, and immediately became communicative.

"That belongs to a gentleman in your company, sir," she observed with evident pride. "It's Mr. Aubrey Hood. He always stops with me every time he comes to Bristol. This is his fourth visit to me. I've put him in the first floor front, just above you."

Adrian had taken the rooms on Deane's recommendation, and it had never occurred to him that any one else might be staying in the house at the same time. He would rather have been alone; but, after all, it was no great matter, and he need not see more of Hood than he cared to. Because they were both under one roof, it did not necessarily follow that they would meet each other elsewhere than at the theatre.

In coming to this decision, however, he soon realized that he had rather reckoned without his host. He had just finished his luncheon, when some one tapped at the door, and the next moment the leading man entered the room.

"I've just heard you were here," he remarked blandly. "It's lucky you took these rooms, because that bounder Tubby Bedford was after them. They're not half bad diggings, are they?"

"They'll do all right for a week," returned Adrian. "Deane recommended them to me. I suppose you know this house well?"

The other smiled in his most superior fashion.

"Oh dear, no! I always stop at the Clifton Downs Hotel when I'm in Bristol. Unfortunately, the place is full up just now—Mrs. Bellingham has taken my old suite there—so I've had to come here instead."

Adrian thought of the landlady's disclosure, and wondered why Hood should think it necessary to lie about so simple a matter. Evidently it was due to his inordinate vanity.

The week's engagement at Bristol promised to be an agreeable one. The August days were warm and pleasant, and "Whitehall" attracted very good audiences for the time of year. To his great satisfaction—for he had looked forward to the meeting with distinct uneasiness—Adrian saw nothing in Mrs. Bellingham's attitude, when he encountered her again on the Monday evening, to suggest that she had any recollection of the way in which they had spent the previous Saturday afternoon together. She was cordial to him, but nothing more. He had a disturbing impression, however, that once, while he was talking to Constance during an interval, she had looked at his companion in an anything but friendly manner. Constance seemed to notice it too, for she stopped suddenly in the midst of a sentence and walked away.

He overtook her as she was leaving the theatre after the performance, and asked her point-blank why she had not finished what she was saying. She fenced with the question, but he was not to be put off.

"Tell me," he demanded. "I want to know."

"It's a rule of the management that there shall be no talking behind the scenes during a performance," she answered.

"Yes, but this was during an interval. Besides, Mrs. Bellingham had been talking to me herself only a moment before."

"Exactly," was the quiet response. "Unfortunately, I'm not Mrs. Bellingham."

He saw what she meant, and promptly changed the subject.

There was a special matinée the next afternoon, and, as he always liked to allow himself plenty of time in which to get ready, he went down to the theatre early. The sound of voices in Mrs. Bellingham's room, however, the door of which happened to be ajar, told him that he was not the first to arrive. In virtue of her position the leading lady occupied the "star" dressing-room. This was on a level with the

stage, and the rest of the company had to pass it to reach their own.

As Adrian approached the door he heard Mrs. Bellingham speaking. From the tone of her voice she appeared to be angry about something. He had no intention of listening, but the words were so distinct that he could not avoid hearing them.

"How do you know they walked back together last night?" he heard her ask.

"Because I saw them," was the reply, in a tone that he failed for the moment to recognize.

"And you say the same sort of thing went on at Brighton, too?"

"Yes, almost every day. Her landlady told me so. She seemed to think they were engaged."

Adrian did not wait to hear any more. He crossed the stage as noiselessly as possible and made his way upstairs, wondering what the fragment of conversation referred to. No names had been mentioned, but he had an uneasy idea that Constance and himself were the subjects of the conversation. He had a strong suspicion, too—amounting, indeed, almost to a certainty—that the other person in the room was Stella Mortimer. The recollection that he had passed her in the roadway while he was hurrying to overtake Constance the night before suddenly recurred to him. He had not thought anything of it at the time, but now it seemed significant.

"Spiteful little jade!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I wish she'd learn to mind her own business."

He dressed rapidly and then hurried down to the stage, eager to have a word with Constance before the curtain went up. As he emerged from the wings he saw her talking to Mrs. Bellingham. With a feeling of surprise and relief combined he noted that she appeared perfectly at ease.

Mrs. Bellingham beamed on him with almost more than her usual graciousness.

"Just the very person I wanted to see," she declared

brightly. "You must come and have tea with me after the matinée in my dressing-room and make up the quartet. The other two will be Miss Assheton and Mr. Gunning."

Although he was somewhat taken by surprise at the mention of Constance's name, her inclusion in the invitation decided him promptly.

"I shall be charmed," he said.

"That's right. I shall expect you, then, as soon as the curtain falls."

Adrian would have liked to have inquired of Constance what she thought of this sudden access of cordiality towards herself, but he had no opportunity. From her expression, however, he could see that she was somewhat surprised. Perhaps, however, Mrs. Bellingham merely meant to be friendly, after all. He wondered if he had been forming a wrong opinion of her hitherto. Certainly it looked rather as if this were the case.

It was with distinctly mixed feelings, nevertheless—for the mysterious remarks he had overheard a couple of hours earlier still puzzled him—that he presented himself at the appointed time. The other guests were already assembled.

Although he knew by experience that Mrs. Bellingham liked to do things comfortably, he was scarcely prepared for the elaborate scale on which she was receiving her visitors. With the aid of flowers, pictures, and books, and a profusion of easy chairs and rugs, the apartment was more like a boudoir than a dressing-room in a provincial theatre. A sumptuous tea, sent in from an adjoining restaurant, was set out on a large tray of Benares ware, which, together with the delicate china service, he recognized as having come from Hans Place.

Mrs. Bellingham noted his scarcely concealed glance of surprise.

"I can't stand pigging it when I'm on tour," she observed, "so I always take a few of my London things about with me. Find yourself a seat, Mr. Merrick, and tell me what you think of these peaches."

The business manager's evident anxiety to conform to the standard of the society in which he found himself was rather amusing to watch. He sat gingerly on the extreme edge of a chair, and seemed somewhat overawed by his surroundings. Altogether, he looked as though he would have been far more at home—as would indeed have been the case—talking to third-rate actors in the saloon bar of a public-house. For the first few minutes he took no part in the general conversation, despite Mrs. Bellingham's efforts to draw him out. Presently, however, he found his tongue and began to talk freely. Constance happened to mention a play which was about to be produced in Paris, and it appeared that he was familiar with the author's previous works. His hostess showed a desire to know something about these, and questioned him closely on the subject.

"I'd like to get hold of that play for myself," she observed reflectively; "Capus would suit me down to the ground."

"Why don't you write to him about it, then?" inquired Gunning.

"It wouldn't be any good. He's probably been pestered with letters from half the managers in London already. Besides, I should want to see the play before deciding anything definitely, and I can't spare the time."

"Then send some one to report upon it for you."

Mrs. Bellingham shook her head.

"Oh, I don't think it's worth while doing that," she answered carelessly.

A few minutes later the business manager got up to leave, and Constance followed him shortly afterwards. The manner in which Mrs. Bellingham looked at her as she went out brought back Adrian's sense of uneasiness again. There was something that almost amounted to malignity in it, the malignity of a hawk watching a dove. The expression passed as swiftly as it came, however, and she turned to her remaining guest with an air of being inspired by none but friendly feelings for all the world.

"Don't run off just yet," she pleaded as he rose. "I've

been wanting to have a talk with you, and I couldn't do so while Mr. Gunning was here. Poor Miss Assheton was bored to extinction by him. He's not very bright, but he shows symptoms of intelligence at times, all the same. Now have another cup of tea, and I'll tell you a little scheme of mine that I think will appeal to you."

Adrian sat down again, his curiosity excited. Mrs. Bellingham took the chair beside him and plunged into the subject at once. She spoke with just a touch of nervousness, as though not quite certain how the proposal would be received.

"Look here, Mr. Merrick, you heard what Gunning said just now about the new Capus play. Well, I'm very keen to get it, and I've already opened negotiations with the author, although I didn't let Gunning know this. The fact is, I heard the other day from a friend who has read the piece that it would just suit me. I must have a second opinion, though—one from some one I can trust. Now the *répétition générale* is to be at the Odéon next Friday evening. What I want you to do is to go over to Paris for me and see it. If you approve I'll finish the negotiations that I've already commenced, and you shall have the commission to prepare the English version for me. Come, what do you say? I know you speak French, so there's no difficulty there."

Adrian hesitated a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. He had been taken completely by surprise.

"No, that's all plain sailing enough," he returned. "Only——"

"Only what?"

"Well, how can I go to Paris if I'm playing here all the week?"

Mrs. Bellingham brushed the objection away with a laugh.

"Don't let that trouble you, my friend. I'll put your understudy on while you're away. It's high time that deserving youth had a chance of earning his salary. We'll consider it settled, then, eh?"

"Certainly," returned Adrian, feeling that the excursion

would be a pleasant little holiday. "I'll be delighted. When do you want me to start?"

"Let me see. This is Tuesday. Suppose you cross on Thursday evening? You'll be in Paris then on Friday morning. Go to the theatre that night. Amuse yourself as you like on Saturday and Sunday, and attend the first performance on Monday. Start back the next day, and join us again on Wednesday at Manchester. I don't want to rush you at all, so I'm allowing you practically a week. If you find you want longer, don't hesitate to take it."

"Oh, I'll hurry back as fast as I can," said Adrian. "I shall be anxious to see you again, you know," he added simply.

At the announcement a curious smile passed over the other's face.

"Thank you," she said. "It's very nice to hear that."

The words seemed like a danger signal, and he rose to go. Mrs. Bellingham stopped him with a gesture.

"One moment, please. I want you to consider that you are absolutely pledged to carry out this commission for me. There must be no coming to me on Thursday morning and saying you'd rather I sent somebody else, because I'm writing to the management to expect you. In fact, a member of the company—a Mademoiselle de Gasquet—has been specially told to tell you about the part I'm thinking of playing. Now, have I your word—your solemn word of honour?"

"Of course you have," he answered, wondering at the extreme earnestness of her manner.

A gleam of satisfaction came into his companion's eyes.

"Thank you. I shall rely on you to keep it, whatever happens. Now there's just one thing further. I didn't mention it before, but perhaps I'd better do so now."

He turned towards her inquiringly.

"Yes?"

"Please remember that this little commission you are undertaking mustn't be talked about. It's to be kept a

strict secret. Not a single word is to be said on the subject to any one in the company—I don't mind about your friends elsewhere—until you come back again. You're not even to write from Paris to any one here, mind."

Adrian's face fell. In anticipation he had pictured Constance's interest in hearing of his projected journey. Now, however, his lips were sealed.

"You see," continued Mrs. Bellingham, speaking with a nervous quickness that was new to her, "if it got known that I'd sent you to see the play on my behalf, all the leading ladies in London would be dangling after it for themselves. The members of my company often envy me, but I'm sure they don't know how much harder I find it to secure a play than they do to secure a part."

Adrian went back to his rooms feeling that the one thing that marred his pleasure at the forthcoming trip was the necessity of keeping it a secret. He would have given almost anything to have been able to tell Constance about it. She would have been interested, he knew. The restriction, too, seemed unnecessary, for other managers when they wanted French plays sent their agents to Paris quite openly. However, the fact that Mrs. Bellingham always did things differently from everybody else probably accounted for her peculiar attitude in this instance. At any rate, he would not bother his head about it any more.

# XXV

THE knowledge that he would be away for some days, during which he could hold no communication with her, sent Adrian's thoughts more strongly than ever in Constance's direction. Not that they were ever far away, though. From the moment when he had first met her she had filled his mind to the exclusion of everybody else. To him she stood for all that he admired in a woman. It seemed impossible, when he contrasted her with others he knew, that she should be earning her living on the stage. The vitiating atmosphere of the footlights had passed her by unscathed. She was as different from the average actress as it was possible to conceive, and he was devoutly thankful for it. Beauty, grace, charm, and freshness all seemed part of Constance Assheton's nature. He had never come across any one quite like her, or any one who appealed to him in the same way. Women friends by the score had been his—and some, he was well aware, would willingly have been more than friends—but they were mere episodes, long since forgotten, put away and done with completely. He doubted if he now remembered half their names even. But Constance was different—altogether different. There was no single incident relating to his association with her that was not burned indelibly upon his mind. From their earliest acquaintance he could recall every word, every gesture, every tone of her voice. The moments when he was with her were the happiest he knew, and when they were over he lived them again.

As to Constance's feelings towards himself he alternated

between the depths of despair and the highest hopes. There were times when he felt certain—and hugged the sweet knowledge with a delight that was in itself almost overpowering—that he was not, at any rate, indifferent to her. The occasion when they had gone to Earl's Court together stood out beyond all others. He felt that he had been very near her that evening. It was not much to build on, certainly; but it was something.

In the hope of seeing her alone, if only for a brief moment or two, he went down to the theatre after luncheon the next day. He knew that she was accustomed to call there for letters about that time. To his disappointment, however, he found that she had left a few minutes before he arrived.

"Miss Assheton came down with Miss Warren, sir," reported the doorkeeper. "I gave them their mail, and they went off again."

Adrian concealed his annoyance stoically.

"Quite so. I don't suppose you happen to know which direction they took?"

The doorkeeper scratched his head reflectively. The operation seemed to stimulate a flow of ideas.

"Now I come to think of it, sir, I did hear one of the ladies say something about going up on the downs for the afternoon. There's a tram that takes one nearly all the way, and I shouldn't be surprised if they haven't gone by it."

"Thanks," said Adrian. "I dare say I'll walk up there myself presently."

He turned away, reflecting over what he had just heard. It was only partly satisfactory. Still, he would try his luck, and at any rate the walk would do him good.

It was a perfect day, and merely to be out of doors was in itself a joy. The fresh sweet air that swept over the great stretches of turf and gorse and heather and fern was pregnant with a thousand delightful scents. A warm, generous sunshine flooded everything in a glory of its own. All Nature seemed to have put on its most smiling face in honour

of the day. Green and gold and purple touched one another, and blended harmoniously on every side. Even the smoke floating over the busy city behind had for once a strange beauty.

In a wild rose bush a thrush sang cheerily, and a lark took up the song overhead. It was a happy augury, thought Adrian. Surely luck would come to him to-day. Surely, too, Constance could not be far off, for the very wind whispered her dear name.

By the side of a little dell that sloped down to a rocky gorge, along the bottom of which the glistening river wound like a silver thread, he decided to rest. The spot looked particularly inviting. A clump of trees shut it in from the road, sheltering it completely from prying eyes, and the soft velvety turf, picked out with bluebells, made an ideal carpet.

He threw himself down luxuriously and lit a cigarette. Under the soothing influence of tobacco he felt at peace with the world. Delightful day-dreams floated before him, weaving pleasant fancies into his brain. Gradually they assumed a definite shape. The trip to Paris would be a great success. He would adapt the French play in a manner that would win him substantial recognition, and pave the way for original work afterwards. Already in anticipation he heard the enthusiastic cheers of a first-night audience. But the thought that thrilled him most was that in all the triumphs awaiting him Constance would share. His success should be her success, and amid the calls for "Author" would arise equally insistent demands for her presence in front of the curtain. If only provided with a good part, Constance, he knew, would make a triumph. And his would be the delightful labour of providing her with such a part.

A rabbit pattering over the fallen leaves broke the stillness and interrupted the current of his thoughts. He watched the soft little bundle of fur idly as it frisked about in happy indifference to his presence. Suddenly it stopped short, its whole body stiffening into an attitude of strained attention.

The next moment it was scurrying across the turf to the friendly shelter of a neighbouring burrow. As it did so, the sound of footsteps on the bank above made the watcher turn his head.

"What a nuisance!" he exclaimed. "Here's somebody coming to disturb me. Well, I'll pretend to be asleep."

He pulled his straw hat over his face and leaned back against a tree. Through his half-closed eyes he could just catch a glimpse of a white skirt and pair of neat shoes moving along the top of the bank. Apparently their owner was watching him, for the feet halted suddenly. Then the footsteps began to descend. He could hear them plainly coming through the thick undergrowth only a few yards away. Obviously, they belonged to a very inquisitive person.

"Some prying female, I know," reflected Adrian in disgust. He closed his eyes again as the branches parted behind him.

The footsteps drew nearer, and finally stopped. As they did so, he felt his hat being lifted. He sat up instantly with a start of surprise, and saw Constance smiling down on him.

"So you're not asleep!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were only pretending."

"Well, this is nice!" he returned, springing to his feet. "You're just the person I wanted to see."

"Thank you," said Constance demurely. "After that, the least I can do is to stop."

She sat down beside him under the shade of a great elm. Adrian shot a swift glance at her as she smoothed away a little tuft of bracken. In her simple gown of white drill she looked particularly fresh and delightful. A bunch of wild roses in the clasp of her belt matched the soft colour of her cheeks. It deepened as she turned and saw his look of undisguised admiration.

"Why did you want to see me?" she demanded.

Adrian let the question pass.

"I always want to see you."

Constance shook her head in disapproval.

"Don't be foolish."

"If it's foolish to want to see some one very charming, I'm afraid I'm incorrigible," he answered boldly.

Constance shook her head again, but she did not look displeased. Adrian noted the fact and felt encouraged. He put out his hand and touched hers. She let it rest there, but he could feel it tremble in his grasp. The rabbit he had already seen came out of its burrow again. It seemed to watch them with friendly interest.

"Constance!" he said softly.

She started at the sound of his voice, and shivered slightly. The soft colour in her cheeks came and went.

"Constance!" he said again. "You know why I want to see you."

She turned slowly, lifting her heavily fringed eyes to his in a steady gaze. As he looked into them he felt that he could see her very soul shining in their clear depths.

"Tell me," she murmured in a strained, eager voice that made him catch at his breath. "Tell me why—Adrian."

Her voice trailed off into a little tense whisper, and she threw out her hands with a quick movement. He seized them and held them fast.

"Because I love you, Constance," he cried impetuously, the words rushing from him in a wild, unchecked torrent. "Oh, you know I do! You know I do! I won't let you go till you say so. Heart's dearest! you're all the world to me and something more. Constance, I want you so much!"

The brightness of her eyes dimmed. Tears glistened in the long lashes fringing them. Adrian, watching closely, felt that they were not tears of sorrow. He saw and understood, and took comfort from the fact.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, say you want me, too!" he cried.

She lifted up her face to his. It had gone suddenly white, but a red spot glowed on either cheek. Her lips trembled, and he had to bend his head to catch the faltering words. The furious beating of his heart seemed to drown everything, and the wind, rustling through the leaves, became a deafening volume of sound. Then it died away to a hushed still-

ness, as though awaiting her answer. Nature itself seemed to hold its breath in sympathy.

"Ah, why will you make me say it? You know I do, Adrian. Oh, Adrian, I want you so much!"

His arms stole round her, and she nestled in them unresistingly. He bent down and would have kissed her dear face, but she drew back with a little gesture of alarm.

"Wait, Adrian. Tell me how much you love me first?"

"With all the love in all the world, my darling."

She shook her head at the answer.

"Ah, that's not the way to love."

He looked at her with something like dismay.

"Is there only one way of loving?"

"Only one that counts," she answered softly.

"And can't I find it?"

She smiled at him in answer.

"Yes, I think so, Adrian dear."

She lifted her face to his again. Hope and trust and happiness shone in it and filled it with a newer and more radiant beauty than it had possessed before. As he kissed her the thrush sang approvingly, and the rabbit scampered back to its burrow in a succession of happy leaps.

Constance smiled as she saw it disappear.

"Look at that sweet little bunny," she said.

"Yes," returned Adrian, "but I want to talk of something much more interesting."

"What is that, pray?"

"You know."

The damask of her cheek deepened.

"Yes," she answered softly, "but—but—tell me, all the same."

"I want to tell you how much I love you, dear."

A happy look crept into her eyes, and she nestled up against him confidingly.

"Oh, Adrian, you'll have to love me such lots. I'm so hungry for love."

"I'll give you all you want, sweetheart."

She sighed happily, and glanced up at him with shining eyes. Suddenly a frightened look came into her face.

"What's the matter, dearest?" he demanded anxiously.

"Oh, Adrian, promise me that, whatever happens, you'll never stop loving me. And you'll never care for any one else, will you?"

He kissed confidence back to her.

"Yes, but promise!" she pleaded.

"I promise, darling. As Ruth promised Naomi, 'The Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part me and thee.'"

She repeated the words slowly.

"That's beautiful! And to think that they were just two women! How they must have loved one another!"

"Not more than I love you, dearest," he answered jealously. "I'm like Jacob. He was the man who served seven years for Rachel; 'and they seemed unto him but a few days for the love that he had to her.'"

"That's beautiful, too, dear, but if you and I were parted for seven years, I shouldn't like the time to seem only a few days to you."

"It wouldn't. Every hour when I'm away from you seems like a month."

"Thank you for saying so, dear. Adrian, I'm afraid you think I'm very exacting."

"I think you're the best and dearest girl in all the world," he answered simply. "Now let's talk of our future, of the time when you and I will always be together, Constance. I want to tell every one that I love you. I wonder what the company will think?"

She drew back, and the frightened look crept into her eyes again.

"Wait," she pleaded. "It's too soon to talk of that, Adrian; you mustn't tell any one—yet."

"Why not?" he demanded in surprise.

"It wouldn't do," she answered resolutely. "You mustn't mention it to any one until I give you leave."

"But I think I ought to tell Mrs. Bellingham, at any rate."

She started at the name.

"No, Mrs. Bellingham least of all. Promise me, Adrian. Promise me."

"Very well," he returned. "Have it your own way, dearest. But how long am I to wait?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"A week. That's only seven short days."

"Seven long ones."

"Cheer up, dear, the time will soon pass."

"I'm not so sure of that," he answered gloomily.

"It will be just as long to me," she returned—"if not longer."

She rose, and looked at the tiny watch encircling her slender wrist.

"Come," she said, "it's time we went if we don't want to keep the curtain down. Do you know, it's nearly six o'clock already, and we've got to be in the theatre by seven. Oh dear! I wish I had a better part."

Adrian smiled. A pleasant thought had just occurred to him.

"Wait till I'm a distinguished dramatist," he said. "You shall choose your own parts then, and play just what you like."

"Perhaps you'll choose another leading lady, though," replied Constance mischievously.

"Dear heart, you needn't be afraid of that."

She turned a radiant face to his.

"No, I don't think I am, really."

# XXVI

IN the wild rush of emotions that drove every thought out of his mind but the wonderful fact that Constance loved him as he loved her, Adrian quite forgot his pending journey. It was not until he was going down to the theatre that evening that he remembered Mrs. Bellingham's commission at all. At the thought of it his new-found elation died away completely.

"And I've got to start to-morrow morning," he reflected ruefully. "And I can't get out of it, because I've promised to go. And I can't tell Constance either, because I'm pledged to keep it a secret from every one in the company. What an infernal nuisance it all is!"

Then a new idea struck him, and his spirits rose again.

"I dare say it will turn out for the best in the end," he told himself. "If I adapt this precious play, I'll see that Constance has a first-class part in it. With half a chance she's bound to make a huge success. Then I can write a play off my own bat for another management, and she shall be my leading lady instead of Mrs. Bellingham. We'll be independent of her altogether then."

It was a delightful prospect, and opened up a splendid vista. He saw himself writing one successful play after another, and Constance gaining triumphs in them all.

Mrs. Bellingham came up to him just before he went on the stage.

"You've not forgotten that you start to-morrow?" she said in a low voice.

"No; I'm quite ready."

"And mind you don't mention your journey to any one in the company."

"I'll be careful," he returned, wondering at her marked insistence on this point. There was no sufficient reason for it that he could see.

Mrs. Bellingham nodded and glided silently away. The look in her face caused Adrian distinct uneasiness. There seemed a suppressed triumph about it that both puzzled and alarmed him. Once or twice during the progress of the act that commenced almost immediately afterwards he caught her watching Constance intently. Her expression was curiously sinister, and her lips were curved into a disdainful smile. The sight made him more determined than ever to join another company with Constance at the first opportunity.

"I believe the dear little girl was right, after all, when she said that Mrs. Bellingham hated her," he reflected.

As soon as the performance was over he changed quickly, and hurried downstairs again to say good night to her. The ladies' dressing-rooms were on the opposite side of the stage, and he was just about to ask one of the scene shifters if Miss Assheton had left the theatre when the call boy came up, holding out a note.

"Mrs. Bellingham's comps and I'm to give you this, sir," he said, with a grin.

Adrian opened it hastily, and glanced at the contents. The wording made him rub his eyes.

DEAR MISS ASSHETON,

I must again complain of your want of attention when on the stage. Twice this evening I saw you talking to Miss Mortimer in the wings while the curtain was up. Pray do not let me have to speak of this any more.

Yours faithfully,

GRACE BELLINGHAM.

He turned to the boy angrily.

"Look here, you little ass, you've given me the wrong note! This isn't meant for me."

A look of surprise spread over the other's face.

"Well, I only 'ad two notes, sir," he protested. "Mrs. Bellingham gave me 'em both. One she said was for you, and the other was for Miss Assheton. Anyway, yours is addressed to you, and chance it."

Adrian thought for a moment, his brain busy with emotions.

"Where is the other note, then?" he demanded.

"Please sir, I posted it, because the gentleman who looks after the stage door told me Miss Assheton had gone 'ome."

"Damn your eyes!" exclaimed Adrian furiously, as he strode away.

The scene shifter, who had been listening with interest to the colloquy, winked at his companions.

"Blimy!" he observed, "but these 'ere play-actors can use languidge when they're put out! Fair shockin', I calls it."

"Right you are, Bill," replied the other. "They ought to be ashamed on 'emselves. Talkin' like that afore kids, too!"

Adrian hurriedly determined on his course of action. He must see Mrs. Bellingham at once, if only to ascertain what she had said in the note that had missed him.

He found her in her room, glancing through an illustrated paper. As he entered she looked up with a glance of pleased expectancy, fading away to one of mock dismay.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "what a serious Adrian all of a sudden!"

"Look here," he returned, plunging at once into the matter before him, "the call boy has just brought me a note from you."

"Quite right," was the tranquil reply. "Why be so tragic about it, my friend?"

Adrian laughed, in spite of his anger.

"I beg your pardon. The fact is, though, this note

appears to be meant for Miss Assheton, and not for me, although it's addressed to me right enough. Here it is."

Mrs. Bellingham gave a little silvery ripple of laughter as she took the note from him and glanced at the enclosure. Then she tore the sheet in half and threw it into the fire-place.

"Pray forgive me. It was quite an accident, I assure you. In the hurry I must have put the two notes in the wrong envelopes. I'm always doing stupid things like that. Mr. Antony says it's due to an artistic temperament, but unkind people call it carelessness."

Adrian, however, was not satisfied. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the other was keeping something back.

"But what about the note that was meant for me? Miss Assheton will get that now."

Mrs. Bellingham became suddenly serious.

"I'm afraid she will. The fact is, I told the call boy to post it if she had left the theatre. She'll send it back to me to-morrow, I suppose. However, it doesn't much matter, as it was only to ask you to see me after the performance to-night, and—well—now you are here."

"Yes," he returned, still feeling far from satisfied, all the same. "As you say, I am here. What can I do for you?"

Mrs. Bellingham glanced up at him from under her long-lashed eyes, her lips curving into a smile of quiet amusement. Then she sighed plaintively, and extended one slim hand towards his. He ignored it, however, and remained standing, anxious to get the interview over as soon as possible.

"Well, to begin with, you can sit down, and be nice and friendly. It's horrid of you to scowl at poor me like that, just because I made a stupid little mistake."

The tremulous droop of her lips was too much for him, and he became contrite at once. Besides, he would not do Constance any good by appearing to champion her too strongly. He must act warily.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, taking the chair she pointed out.

"Ah, that's ever so much better! Now I feel we're friends again. Well, what I wanted you for was to give you this. It's a card of admission to the Odéon Theatre. They'll change it for a stall at the box-office when you get there."

Adrian took the card, feeling that a good deal of unnecessary fuss was being made about it. The card could have been posted to him quite well by the management when he arrived in Paris. He thought it best, however, to keep his views on the subject to himself.

"Write to me as soon as you arrive," went on Mrs. Bellingham, "and let me know what hotel you're stopping at. I shall be anxious to hear from you. Let me know, too, how you get on with Mademoiselle de Gasquet. I must telegraph your hotel to her."

"My address will be Meurice's. I've stopped there before, and the place is comfortable."

She looked at him and sighed.

"I wish I was going to Paris with you."

"Oh, well," he answered lightly, "run over for the Sunday."

He regretted the suggestion, however, as soon as he had made it, and saw with relief that she shook her head.

"It wouldn't do."

Anxious to avoid a repetition of the Brighton episode, he said good night a moment afterwards. He was rather surprised to find that she made no attempt to detain him.

Late as it was, he went into the General Post Office on his way back and sent off a couple of telegrams to Marchmont and Deane, asking them to lunch with him in town the next day. Then, returning to his rooms, he wrote a little note to Constance, explaining that Mrs. Bellingham had kept him when he had wanted to see her home.

He would have given anything if only he could have told her of the journey he was about to undertake. The temptation to break his promise was almost irresistible. In the end, however, he triumphed over it.

"Constance will say I'm right when she hears my explana-

tion," he reflected. Then he began to pack, for he meant to make an early start the next morning.

At breakfast time he found a letter on his plate. It had been posted late the previous evening. The handwriting stirred him strangely. He could scarcely wait until the landlady had left the room before tearing it open.

> *Why didn't you wait for me last night, Adrian? I wanted you to walk back with me so much. Dearest, I shan't be able to see you until the evening. I've just had a wire making an appointment with a London manager, so I'm going up to town for the day, and I shall have started by the time this reaches you, because I'm travelling by the 8.30. Come to the station at six o'clock to meet me on my return.—Constance.*

"How nice of her to have written!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "But why didn't she tell me where she was going? We could have travelled together then. I've missed her by an hour now, and it will be a week before I see her again."

He put the letter away carefully. It was sacred to him now. Constance's hands had touched it. Her dear presence seemed to linger about the folds of the paper.

On arriving at Paddington he drove straight to Marchmont's rooms in the Temple. There he found that enterprising journalist busy filling a huge trunk with a miscellaneous assortment of books and clothes. A couple of tightly strapped portmanteaux and a bulging hold-all occupied the centre of the floor, while a pile of manuscripts and pictures covered the table and overflowed on to an arm-chair.

Adrian sat down on a hat-box and took in the scene.

"What on earth is up?" he demanded. "Have you got the brokers in?"

Marchmont filled his pipe placidly, and surveyed him with a cheerful grin.

"No, they arrive next week. I'm trying to convey the

impression that I'm packing. It doesn't seem to strike you, though, in this light?"

Adrian picked up a book to throw at his head.

"If you don't mind, take this one instead," said Marchmont. "It's only a library one."

Adrian laughed and substituted a boot as a more suitable missile. The other caught it as it flew across the room and stuffed a sock methodically into it.

"The fact is, my polite young play-actor," he continued, "I'm leaving London almost directly."

"Indeed! Going far?"

"A little matter of about six thousand miles."

Adrian became interested at once.

"Where are you off to, then?"

"To the Cape by the next boat. There seems to be a strong demand for intelligent leader writers in that part of the world. At any rate, I've just had a billet offered me on the 'Argus,' and I've closed with it. Now it's my turn to ask questions. What are you doing in town? Have your troupe of barnstormers dried up, or has the fascinating Mrs. Bellingham sacked you?"

"Not yet. As a matter of fact, the piece is going rather strong, and the management's still wearing the smile that won't come off. I'm running across to Paris to-night on Mrs. Bellingham's behalf to see the new Capus play at the Odéon. Do you happen to know anything about it?"

Marchmont put his pipe down, and unfolded a newspaper cutting.

"Here's a column that I've written in this week's 'Footlights' on the subject. I don't understand your violent hurry, though."

"Well, I want to see the *répétition générale*. It's to be given to-morrow. The first performance is on Monday."

"Indeed!" was the tranquil response. "Who's been telling you all this?"

Adrian stared at him in amazement.

"Mrs. Bellingham, of course. Isn't it right, then?"

The other gave a prolonged whistle.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he exclaimed.

"I dare say you are," returned Adrian calmly. "Any particular reason for it, though?"

Marchmont's manner changed swiftly.

"Look here," he observed, "you say Mrs. Bellingham told you this? If so, then somebody's been pulling her pretty leg."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Why, this *répétition générale* has been postponed until Monday, and the first performance is not to take place until Wednesday. I met a member of the Odéon staff in Gatti's last night, and he told me he'd sent Mrs. Bellingham a letter to this effect."

"It's impossible," returned Adrian with decision.

"Indeed! Why?"

"Oh, well, because Mrs. Bellingham would have told me if this had been the case. Otherwise, what object would she have in sending me to Paris two days before it's necessary?"

"Ask me another. I'm not an expert in the ways of leading ladies. I expect she's got some little game on, though."

"Oh, rot!" retorted Adrian. "Even if this man did write, she hasn't had the letter."

"I dare say. Still, I wouldn't worry if I were you. A couple more days in Paris with all expenses paid sounds rather attractive than otherwise. I suppose you'll start to-night as you originally arranged?"

"Yes, I've got to meet some one from the theatre there the first thing to-morrow morning. Now let's go to lunch."

They went to the Café Royal, where Deane was to meet them by appointment. Adrian's thoughts were far away, centred on Constance. What a pity it was that Mrs. Bellingham had not heard of the postponement in time. He could have delayed his departure another two days then —two days which he might have spent with Constance. Then, too, if Constance had only told him where she would be in London he might have met her. Now at least a week

must elapse before he could see her again, and he might not even write to her until he had left Paris. Oh, it was maddening! What a fool he had been to give that pledge to Mrs. Bellingham!

The big glass doors of the café swung open, and, with the gold-laced giant in charge nodding affably, they stepped into the entrance-hall. Beside the little newspaper stand they saw Godfrey Deane, looking at the serried rows of French journals fluttering in the draught. He turned as the two came up and held out his hand.

"Awfully glad to see you, Merrick," he exclaimed heartily. "I want to know what you're doing in town, though, and also what the latest news is of the 'Whitehall' company? Do the ladies still draw metaphorical chalk lines across the floors of their dressing-rooms, and dare one another to step over them? The 'Stage' and the 'Era' are distressingly dumb on the subject."

Adrian laughed.

"Oh, we're quite a happy family!"

Over the meal he explained the reason of his sudden presence in London. Deane listened attentively. He seemed to take Marchmont's view that Mrs. Bellingham's attitude was a little curious.

"I'm hanged if I quite understand it, old chap," he remarked uneasily. "She must have known of this postponement. It was decided on three days ago. I heard of it at the club last Monday."

"I expect the Odéon people wrote to her at the Embankment, and their letter hasn't been forwarded yet," observed Marchmont.

"Very likely," said Adrian. He was tired of the subject, and did not want to discuss it any longer. "Tell me about yourself. How's the show at the St. George's going?"

Deane and Marchmont exchanged glances.

"It's not going at all," he returned. "It's gone."

"Came off last night," added Marchmont. "Don't you ever get any news in the provinces?"

"A little filters down to us sometimes. I've been too busy, though, to read the papers lately. I'm sorry the St. George's has closed down. Have you fixed up anything else?"

"Well, I've almost settled to go to New York next week. In fact, I sign my contract to-morrow. So make a fuss of me now, as you probably won't see me again for some time."

Adrian heard the news with something like dismay.

"Hang it all!" he burst out. "Every one seems to be going away. Here's Marchmont off to South Africa, and you to America. I wonder who will be the next of my friends to disappear?"

Then they went back to the Temple, and spent the rest of the afternoon talking over their plans.

"I don't know what you think about it," observed Deane reflectively, as the train glided out of the station a couple of hours later, with Adrian waving his hand in farewell, "but to my mind Mrs. Bellingham's action in packing our trusting young friend off to Paris in this violent hurry is deuced fishy. I really think he ought to be in a home."

Marchmont rolled a cigarette contemplatively.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," he returned. "But what's to be done? One can no more argue with him than one can with Providence, or a pawnbroker."

# XXVII

THE early-door patrons, anxious to obtain front seats, were already streaming into the theatre. The rustling of programmes and cracking of nuts in the pit and gallery mingled with the tuning up of the orchestra and the shuffling of feet as the audience settled down into their places. Behind the curtain even greater activity reigned. As the moment for the commencement of the night's business approached, white-coated and canvas-shod scene shifters dropped their apathy and moved about with a briskness that almost won the growling approval of the perspiring master-carpenter. Gasmen and electricians busied themselves practising lighting effects, while the stage manager and his assistants put the final touches to the various articles of furniture used in the opening act. There was a look of annoyance on Keene's usually good-humoured face as he moved to and fro, superintending the arrangements. He glanced at his watch every now and again, and then looked towards the wings as though expecting some one.

The long corridor leading to the ladies' dressing-rooms resounded to the pattering footsteps and shrill voice of the call boy, delivering a warning at each door.

"Overture and beginners, five minutes, please!"

As he heard the summons, Keene crossed the stage to Gunning, who had just entered from the back.

"There'll be the hell of a row presently," he declared, "if Miss Assheton doesn't arrive. We ring up almost directly, and I daren't keep the curtain down. I wonder what the devil has happened to the girl!"

"Ask me another," returned Gunning. "I sent a messenger to her rooms just now, and the landlady reports that she went up to town by the 8.30 train this morning, saying she'd be back again by six o'clock. I suppose you've warned her understudy?"

"Yes, Miss Warren will go on for her. She can't act for toffee, but she'll have to try. It will be a brilliant show to-night, I can tell you! Merrick is out of the bill, too. Mrs. Bellingham told me last night that he was going to be away for a week, but she didn't say why. Young Sinclair is to play his part. Ugh! he's only fit to carry a flag in a pantomime."

"Well, I wouldn't be in Miss Assheton's shoes when she does turn up," replied the manager. "It's my belief Mrs. B. is only waiting for an opportunity to give her the push. She's had her knife into her for a long time past."

"And a damned shame, too!" declared Keene emphatically. "Hullo! here she comes," he added, as the dressing-room door behind him opened and Mrs. Bellingham swept on to the stage. "And in a pretty temper, too. Look out for squalls!"

"I'm going to do a bunk," observed Gunning as he retired hastily into the wings. "I don't want to see her until she's cooled down a bit. As a family man, I can't take any risks."

There was an ominous expression in the inquiring glance which the leading lady swept round the stage. She came up to the two men, acknowledging their greeting in the curtest possible fashion.

"Well," she demanded, "has Miss Assheton condescended to appear yet?"

"She hasn't arrived in the theatre, madam," answered Keene. "I sent to her rooms, and the landlady says she has gone up to town for the day. I'm afraid she's missed her train back."

"Indeed!" was the icy response. "By the way, did either you or Mr. Gunning give her leave to go?"

"Mr. Gunning didn't, and she said nothing to me on the subject."

"H'm! Just what I expected. Send another message to her rooms, Mr. Keene, to the effect that I will see her here at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, and not before. Miss Warren is to play her part until further orders."

The absence of the two members of the company excited a good deal of discussion among the remainder. As soon as the first act was over and Mrs. Bellingham had withdrawn to her own room, tongues were loosened on the subject freely.

"Poor Mrs. Bellingham looks quite annoyed, and I don't wonder at it," observed Miss Warren with virtuous indignation. "To go off like this and not turn up at the proper time is enough to put anybody out."

"Well, you play Miss Assheton's part a bit better these next three acts, and she might cheer up a little," remarked Keene. "Spiteful little cat!" he added to himself as he moved away. "She's as pleased as Punch that the girl should get into trouble."

Mabel Warren gazed after him disdainfully.

"What spoils the Profession, dear," she remarked to Stella Mortimer, "is that they never have gentlemen for stage managers."

During the next interval a fresh impetus was given to the field of speculation. The call boy, who had been sent out by Bedford to fetch him a bottle of stout, brought back with it an evening paper for Hood. The leading man glanced casually at the centre page, and then gave a start of surprise.

"I say," he exclaimed, "there's been an accident on the line! The four o'clock train from Paddington—the one that Connie Assheton was coming by—ran off the rails at Reading."

A chorus of eager inquiries arose at once.

"No, there's no one hurt," continued Hood. "The stop-press telegram merely says, 'Train derailed outside Reading Station. No one injured, but traffic blocked for some hours. Passengers transferred to special, arriving in Bristol about 11 p.m.'"

"I must let Mrs. Bellingham know at once," remarked Gunning. "Lend me the paper, old man. She's not in the humour to believe me on my bare word."

The business manager's gloomy forebodings proved well founded. Mrs. Bellingham listened to him coldly, and greeted his explanation with an unpleasant little laugh.

"I really don't see," she observed, "what all this has to do with the case. It doesn't alter the fact that Miss Assheton is absent without my permission. However, we won't discuss it now."

Gunning went back to the stage feeling rather depressed. He was genuinely sorry for Constance, and Mrs. Bellingham's manner did not promise well.

"It's no good," he said to Keene a moment later. "I said all I could for the girl, but I might as well have talked to a brass statue."

"Well, we all have our troubles," returned the other philosophically. "I'm afraid this means that Miss Assheton will get her notice."

He went round to Constance's rooms after the performance, and, in accordance with his instructions, left a note telling her to be at the theatre at three o'clock the next afternoon to see Mrs. Bellingham. It was beginning to rain and he would have hurried away, but the landlady seemed inclined for conversation.

"There's another note waiting for Miss Assheton," she remarked. "It came just after she'd started this morning. The post was late, or she'd have got it before she left."

Keene glanced carelessly at the envelope.

"Why, it's in Mrs. Bellingham's handwriting," he exclaimed in surprise.

"Is it, sir?" observed the other. "I must ask her for the autygraf to put in my collection. You must come round and see it when you've time. I've got some belonging to actresses as well as to ladies."

The stage manager went off to his own lodgings, feeling somewhat puzzled at the turn of events.

"It beats me altogether," he muttered, as he let himself in. "I don't like the way things are going on. Mrs. B. is playing some little game of her own, I'll go bail. I'd like to know what it is, though."

Half an hour later Constance arrived at the station, tired out with her recent experiences and anxious on account of missing the evening performance. It was the first time she had ever done such a thing in all her career, and she was nervous as to how Mrs. Bellingham would regard the matter. She felt depressed, too, at the note she received from Adrian that morning. His failure to see her home on the previous night had been a great disappointment, and his explanation did not make things much better.

"He couldn't come with me because Mrs. Bellingham wanted him," she repeated disconsolately. "I do think he might have put me before her."

Then she comforted herself with the reflection that there would certainly be a long letter from him waiting at her rooms. Perhaps he would even be there himself!

Despite all efforts to the contrary, however, a sinister apprehension that refused to be shaken off pursued her as the cab rattled up the road from the station. The night had turned out wet, and a sleeting drizzle beat againt the panes, while a chill wind, against which her thin dress afforded no protection, moaned dismally in her ears. It seemed to convey a threat, and she shuddered a little as she heard it.

"A rough night, miss," remarked the driver, as he opened the door when at last the cab drew up outside the house.

But Constance scarcely heard him. She was busy with other thoughts. The eagerness with which she took the two letters that the landlady gave her faded to a keen disappointment when she saw that neither was from Adrian.

"Isn't there another one?" she asked blankly.

The landlady bridled.

"Certainly not, miss, or else I'd 'ave given it you."

"But are you sure?" persisted Constance. "I was expecting one."

"Well, you've got two," replied the other tartly. "I can't make letters, can I?"

"No, I suppose not," returned Constance absently. Then, to cut short further argument, she went slowly upstairs into her sitting-room.

The first letter she opened was the one which the stage manager had left. It was quite formal in its tone, and merely stated that Mrs. Bellingham wished to see her at the theatre the next afternoon. It gave her a feeling of vague uneasiness, however, that she was quite unable to get rid of.

As she stared at it disconsolately she suddenly remembered that the other letter was still unread. The address in Mrs. Bellingham's handwriting made her hesitate to open it. She felt instinctively that its contents would not be pleasant. Then it dawned on her that as it had come through the post and bore the previous day's date, it could have nothing to do with her absence from the theatre that night.

She opened the envelope and glanced idly over the enclosure. As she took in the first words she gave a little gasp of astonishment. Surely she had read them wrongly, or else she was dreaming? No; there they stared up at her as before in Mrs. Bellingham's well-known handwriting—"My dearest Adrian." To make assurance doubly sure, however, she turned to the signature—"Ever your own Grace." The words danced and swam before her, making her brain reel as she saw them. With a supreme effort she smoothed out the sheet and read its contents straight through.

*My dearest Adrian,*

*Why didn't you come to see me this afternoon as you had promised? I waited in for you until five o'clock. Come to my dressing-room immediately the performance is over to-night.*

*Ever your own*

*Grace.*

Constance stared at the page with blazing eyes and burning

cheeks. What did it all mean? Surely there must be some mistake? It was a hideous nightmare. She was dreaming, and would wake up again presently and be able to laugh at it all. But no—there was no mistake. She rubbed her eyes and looked once more. She was wide awake now. The words seemed written in letters of fire. They writhed and twisted over the sheet of paper in all their horrible nakedness, and scorched her as she read them—"*My dearest Adrian —Ever your own Grace.*" Oh God! why didn't she wake up; or was she never going to do so again?

She battled with it desperately, but the awful thought refused to be dispersed. It beat itself relentlessly into her brain and rose up and mocked her. She saw it all now; fool —thrice deluded fool—she had been not to have done so before! Adrian didn't care for her. That was it. She was nothing to him. He had been amusing himself with her all the time. It was Mrs. Bellingham he was in love with. They were on intimate terms with one another—her letter to him made it clear beyond the possibility of doubt. It was to Mrs. Bellingham he had gone last night. His own note—the one she had received that morning just before leaving the house—admitted it. Oh God! and she had actually kissed that letter! Her lips felt blistered at the recollection. She had read it through a hundred times in the train on the way to London, and each time with an added joy. Every word of it was stamped on her memory. It was even nestling against her heart at that moment. The thought made her sick with shame. It was like a sword-thrust.

With trembling fingers she took it out. She looked at the folded sheet dry-eyed. She had no tears left now; she felt, indeed, as though she would never have any more. Her first impulse was to tear it into a thousand pieces. Then another idea struck her. Crossing over to the table, she put the letter, together with the one that had come from Mrs. Bellingham by mistake, into an envelope and directed it to him. There was no necessity for any explanation. The two enclosures told their own story in a manner that rendered

even a single word from her superfluous. Her hand trembled a little as she wrote the address, although she tried hard to keep it steady. She sealed the flap securely, beset by a horrible fear lest the prying eyes of his landlady should examine the contents before they reached him.

The task was done at last. She came back to the chair beside the hearth again, and sat down, staring into the dying embers. For hour after hour she sat there without a movement—thinking, thinking. The flames died down and flickered out, leaving the grate cold and cheerless. Only the falling ashes broke the silence. But still she did not move. She might have been carved of stone. The chill, grey dawn stealing in through the curtained window found her still sitting there—thinking, thinking, thinking.

# XXVIII

SHE made a pretence of eating some breakfast when the time came, for she felt that the sharp eyes of her landlady were regarding her with no friendly look. The woman hung about the room until Constance in desperation began to think she would never go. At last, however, with an audible sniff, the other realized that her attempts to open a conversation were doomed to failure.

With a sigh of relief Constance heard the door bang. She wanted to be alone, so that she might prepare for the ordeal of the afternoon. From the stage manager's curtly worded note, it was evident that Mrs. Bellingham was incensed against her. Well, in the face of what had already happened, this did not matter much. Nothing mattered now.

When the hour for the interview arrived she took a cab to the theatre. If she walked down there was a chance that she might meet Adrian on the way. The bare thought of doing so made her shudder. As for seeing him at the evening performance she had no fear of that, for she had settled on a course of action which would render such a thing impossible.

"It's the only thing to do," she told herself. "I can't stop here another day."

Mrs. Bellingham was in her room, announced the stage-door keeper, and had left a message that Miss Assheton was to go straight there.

She tapped at the door, wondering why the loud beating of her heart was not heard on the other side of the panel. A moment later she found herself in the room.

Mrs. Bellingham, languidly turning over the pages of a book of Press cuttings, looked up as she entered. There was a smile of suppressed triumph on her face, but she spoke with a studied deliberation.

"Well," she said coldly, "so you're here at last, Miss Assheton. What explanation have you to give me as to your absence last night?"

"None at all," returned Constance quietly.

Mrs. Bellingham flushed a little, and shot a quick glance at her.

"You won't do yourself any good by being impertinent, Miss Assheton. As it happens, I know that you spent yesterday in town, and that the train you were coming back by met with an accident, which delayed its arrival."

"Yes," said Constance wearily. "It was impossible for me to be here by seven o'clock."

"Quite so. But what I have yet to learn is why you went to London at all. You will be good enough to tell me."

"I went on my own business. My time is my own."

An angry gleam crept into the other's eyes.

"Pardon me for correcting you," she observed in her most cutting tones, "but it's nothing of the sort. By your contract I have a first call on your services. If I'd wanted to do so, I could have had a rehearsal yesterday afternoon, and you would have been absent from it. Still, I am prepared to overlook that. What I will not overlook, however, is your failure to have been here in time for the evening performance. Neither Mr. Gunning, nor Mr. Keene, nor myself gave you permission to be away. I believe that is the case?"

"Quite right; nobody gave me leave."

Mrs. Bellingham flushed again. She had expected an attitude of contrition. So far, however, there was no hint of it.

"And may I ask if you intend to be here to-night?"

Constance shook her head.

"No, I don't," she answered listlessly.

Mrs. Bellingham dropped a telegraph form she was fingering and stared at her with genuine amazement.

"Indeed! And why not, pray?"

"Because I'm leaving the company. I've written out my resignation for you. Here it is."

She put a sheet of paper down on the table, and looked at her questioner steadily. The other gave a little laugh, half of contempt and half of annoyance.

"So that's your attitude, is it? What will you have the insolence to do next, I wonder? However, as it saves me the trouble of dismissing you, I suppose I ought to be thankful. Understand me plainly, your engagement ceases from to-day. Under the circumstances, I trust you will see the advisability of leaving Bristol to-morrow morning."

"I shall leave this afternoon."

For the first time during the interview a gleam of pleasure crept into Mrs. Bellingham's eyes. This was better than she had anticipated. However, there was something that still had to be cleared up.

"One moment," she said, as the other rose to go. "Have you considered what explanation you will give to the remainder of the company?"

Constance's face paled. Her questioner saw with secret satisfaction that the shaft had gone home.

"I shall give none at all."

Mrs. Bellingham smiled to herself. Nothing could be better.

"You will do as you please, of course," she returned suavely. "Still, questions will probably be asked. I dare say that Mr. Merrick, for example, will want to know all about it. What shall I tell him if he does?"

Constance raised her face, a red spot burning in either cheek.

"Tell Mr. Merrick—or anybody else—what you choose," she answered steadily.

Mrs. Bellingham flushed in turn. She was beginning to get angry at the other's indifference.

"I shall. By the way—that reminds me of something. By accident I enclosed a letter to Mr. Merrick in an envelope addressed to you last night. Did you get it?"

"Yes," said Constance slowly. "I got it."

"Then be good enough to return it to me."

"I'm afraid I can't."

Mrs. Bellingham bit her lip. This was a new and unexpected development.

"And why not, pray?"

"Because I've re-posted it to Mr. Merrick."

"Ah, you sent it here to the theatre, I suppose?"

Constance shook her head again. She was tired of being questioned, and wanted to go. The atmosphere of the room, with its reek of patchouli and cigarette smoke, stifled her.

"No," she answered, in a hard, toneless voice that she scarcely recognized as belonging to herself, "I sent it to his private address."

"That's rather a pity. I'm afraid it will miss him now."

Constance turned swiftly.

"Why?" she demanded.

Mrs. Bellingham laughed at her eagerness. She had discovered where the knife probed most deeply. The knowledge was very soothing.

"Dear me! don't you know? I thought Mr. Merrick and you were such great friends. Is it possible that he didn't tell you he was spending a week in Paris? As a matter of fact, he left yesterday. He complained that Bristol was boring him, and that he wanted a holiday."

Constance heard her as if in a dream.

"I don't believe you," she exclaimed.

"Just as you please," was the tranquil response. "Perhaps you will believe this telegram, though? It reached me an hour ago. Listen to what it says: 'Arrived in Paris yesterday. Am staying at hotel mentioned. Anxious to

hear from you. Have met Helene de Gasquet. Very charming.—Adrian Merrick.' Quite a chatty message, isn't it?"

Constance stared at the flimsy sheet of paper, her brain reeling. Here was some new infamy, blacker than any other that had preceded it. For the moment the written words dancing before her eyes seemed quite meaningless, and Mrs. Bellingham's mocking voice sounded very far away. Now Hope was dead indeed, and Adrian had killed it—that was all she could think of. . . . The four walls of the room were suddenly stripped away, and she leaned back, gasping for breath, in a desperate attempt to shut out the scene that rose up in its place . . . a carpet of soft green turf, with a friendly little rabbit frisking about among the bluebells that bordered it . . . a west wind sighing gently in the trees . . . a thrush singing in a hawthorn bush overhead . . . and Adrian's voice—"*Heart's dearest, you're all the world to me, and something more. Constance, I want you so much!*" Oh, God! would the picture never fade?

Great sounds roared distantly in her brain. Then something seemed to snap there, and she became conscious once more that Mrs. Bellingham had not finished speaking. The words were clear and distinct now. Not a syllable escaped her.

"Well, that convinces you, I hope. If you want further proof that Mr. Merrick is not here, get one of this evening's programmes. You will find in it that his understudy is playing his part for him, and that he did so last night as well. Perhaps this would interest you also," she added, picking up an illustrated paper and opening it in the centre. "It's a full-page portrait of Mademoiselle de Gasquet—the lady Mr. Merrick speaks of. She seems to be rather fascinating."

But Constance took no notice of the suggestion. Indeed, she scarcely heard it. The one thing she could think of just then was that on the very day after he had told her he loved her he had gone away without a word. The discovery broke down the last barrier of hope she had built up that even yet

some explanation might be forthcoming. All the way down to the theatre she had hugged a faint prospect desperately to herself that Adrian's conduct might admit of some solution after all. For example, the letter from Mrs. Bellingham might turn out to be nothing but a joke—a bad one, certainly, but still a joke—on the part of that lady, and that she might yet be able to laugh over it with him. But now the dream was shattered utterly; the broken pieces lay at her feet, and nothing could put them together again.

She went slowly out of the room, groping her way as though stricken with sudden blindness. The stage-door keeper looked at her curiously.

"I expect she's been getting a rare old talking to," he muttered to himself. "I shouldn't be surprised if she 'asn't 'ad the sack."

The warning tinkle of the telephone bell on the office wall interrupted his train of thought.

"That's Mrs. Bellingham," he observed, as he picked up the receiver and listened attentively. Then, in obedience to the message that reached him, he hurried off to her room.

Mrs. Bellingham turned round from the desk she was sitting at and held out a telegram form.

"Send some one down to the General Post Office with this," she said. "See if you can read it, though, first."

The door-keeper scratched his head reflectively as he slowly spelled out the message.

"Merrick, Odol—no—Odyon Theayter, Paris. Never mind waiting for Wednesday's prem-yer. See Monday performance and return Tuesday. Grace Bellingham."

"Quite right. See that it's sent off at once, please."

The door-keeper went back to his little hutch, staring at the telegram form with a look of perplexity. He called in a passing scene shifter and invited his assistance in solving the problem that had arisen.

"'Ere, Bill, you were at college last," he observed. "Just cast your eye over this, an' tell us what the blooming 'ell a

premyer is. Mrs. Bellingham is 'aving one sent from Paris by telegraph."

"I expect it's French for a new back-cloth," returned the other helpfully. "I 'eard Mr. Keene say as 'ow one was wanted."

At the theatre that night the continued absence of Constance occasioned fresh discussion. Every one had been certain she would take her part in the cast as usual, and when she failed to do so the fact excited a good deal of comment. Hood announced his intention of consulting Mrs. Bellingham on the subject, and went off to her dressing-room for the purpose.

A few minutes later he returned, and joined the group in the wings again. There was a look of surprise on his face that made everybody curious.

"Well?" demanded Stella. "What did Mrs. Bellingham say?"

The leading man shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, she's as close as an oyster. First of all she politely told me to mind my own business, and then she condescended to explain that Miss Assheton had left the company altogether. I asked why, but I couldn't get another word out of her. It's my opinion that she has been sacked. Our charming friend has had her knife into her for a long time past."

"Dear me, I am sorry!" declared Mabel Warren, trying to look sympathetic, but failing egregiously.

"Rats!" retorted Bedford. "Much more likely that Connie gave Mrs. Bellingham notice."

Hood surveyed him with a gesture of contempt.

"Oh, you ought to be taken care of!" he replied. "Is it likely that a girl would chuck up a decent engagement on her own account?"

It was the business manager who corroborated Hood's information. He came up to Mabel Warren during the next interval, an expression of genuine concern on his face.

"Connie Assheton has left the company," he announced

shortly. "You are to play her part for the rest of the week."

Miss Warren made an unsuccessful attempt to conceal her satisfaction.

"All right. But what do you mean by only for the rest of the week?"

Gunning chuckled sardonically.

"Because I'm wiring up to town for another girl to take it over on Monday."

# XXIX

SUNDAY morning saw the company assembled on the platform of the railway station, waiting for the Manchester train to start. Constance's absence had ceased to be a subject of general discussion. The excitement of moving to another town furnished fresh topics of interest.

"I do think it a shame," remarked Miss Warren plaintively to Mr. Bedford, "that these Sunday papers don't tell the public what they'd be interested to know. I wired to 'Mordred' of the 'Referee' on Friday, saying that I was playing Miss Assheton's part until further notice, and had got two calls after the second act, but the editor hasn't put it in."

The comedian, however, was engaged in a heated argument with the guard respecting a bicycle which he considered should travel as theatrical scenery, and took no notice. Miss Warren, accordingly, turned to the stage manager for sympathy. He did not offer her much.

"I think he might at least have thanked you for the warning," was all the comment he vouchsafed.

Contrary to her usual custom, Mrs. Bellingham travelled by the same train as the remainder of the company, instead of following on the next day in solitary state. She seemed rather nervous and ill at ease, and Gunning, who was dispatched to obtain a continental Bradshaw, reported that she had "nearly jumped down his throat" when he had inquired if she expected any one from abroad.

"I only asked out of common politeness," he observed. "She shut me up pretty sharp, though, I can tell you."

At Manchester the company were met by the advance

representative. He was a spruce young man of the Raphael Montagu type, and wore even more startling clothes. Adrian had often wondered who held him down while he put on his waistcoat.

He swept off his hat with an elaborate gesture as Mrs. Bellingham deseended from her carriage.

"I've been to the theatre and brought your letters, madam," he observed briskly. "One of them's from Paris. I had to pay an extra penny on it, as it was over weight. The week's booking has reached three figures already, and it's going up fast. I expect that by Wednesday evening——"

"Oh, never mind what you expect!" interrupted the other irritably. "Here, give me those letters, and see that my luggage is sent up to the Midland."

She took the packet of correspondence and hurried into a waiting-room. There she examined the pile eagerly, turning over the envelopes until she reached the one she was looking for. It bore the Paris postmark, and the handwriting sent a little quiver of pleasurable expectation through her.

"At last!" she murmured, as she tore it open and read the contents. They seemed to be satisfactory, for her pale face lighted up, and she began to hum a little air as she thrust the other letters unread into a handbag.

"So he's on his way back already, is he?" she murmured, with shining eyes; "and will meet me at the theatre tomorrow afternoon about three o'clock. Oh, how can I wait all that time?"

She emerged on to the platform again with such a cheerful smile that Gunning, who had been purposely keeping out of the way, felt emboldened to speak to her.

"Strike me lucky!" he remarked to Keene over a whisky and soda in the refreshment bar a few minutes later, "but her ladyship is now looking as though some one had left her a fortune."

"Bet you a pint she gets into one of her tantrums again by the evening," was the pessimistic retort.

At the short rehearsal which took place the next morning it was evident that some anxiety sat heavily on Mrs. Bellingham's ordinarily placid brow. She seemed curiously absent-minded, and left matters almost entirely to the stage manager. The company wandered through their parts very much as they pleased, and she let glaring mistakes go by without a word of protest. Bedford's whispered confidence to Stella Mortimer that "things looked precious rum" voiced the general sentiment.

About two o'clock Mrs. Bellingham stopped the proceedings abruptly, declaring that she was too tired to watch the company's antics any longer.

"Oh, don't bother me!" she exclaimed petulantly, when Keene inquired if the rehearsal was to be resumed later on. "I've got other matters to attend to."

She went off to her own room at the back of the stage. It was a large and comfortable apartment, furnished as a sitting-room, with a small dressing-room opening off it. It was really intended to serve as a green-room for the use of the entire company, but, as a London "star," Mrs. Bellingham considered herself entitled to the exclusive use of it.

Closing the door, she threw herself down on a great sofa that extended the full length of one wall, and glanced at the little silver travelling-clock on the mantelpiece.

"Nearly an hour to wait," she murmured, "before he comes. Heavens! how the time crawls!"

Her eyes swept round the crowd of little personal knick-knacks with which the room was strewn. She always travelled with a quantity of private property, in the shape of ornaments, books, flower vases, pictures, and photographs, etc., by means of which the asperities of the average theatrical dressing-room were toned down and softened. It was just as easy, she considered, to be comfortable on tour as uncomfortable; and a good deal pleasanter.

As her gaze wandered restlessly from corner to corner, it fell on a big silver-framed photograph of Adrian. It was an enlargement from a small one which she had once asked him

for almost at the commencement of their acquaintance. Her face softened, and the lines about her mouth fell away as she examined the likeness. Then, with a little sigh, she crossed the room to the table where it stood and peered down into the frame; her lips pressed against the glass.

"Adrian!" she cried passionately.

The cold surface chilled her, and she drew back shivering.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" she muttered. "But I can't help it!"

She lit a scented cigarette, and, going back to the sofa, lay down again. After a few minutes' rest she became a little calmer. The time was slipping by rapidly. He would soon be with her now. She picked up a book that had been forwarded from Mudie's and turned over the pages idly. The volume failed to interest her, however, and she flung it unceremoniously into the fire-place. A hot ash fell on it and burned a great hole in the dainty cover. She watched it unmoved, her thoughts busy elsewhere. What was a library-book more or less at such a moment?

At last, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, her eager ears caught the sound of approaching footsteps in the passage outside. As they stopped, a moment of agonizing suspense ensued. Then, with the opening of the door, it fled.

She rose to her feet and went towards the visitor with outstretched hands, her face radiant, and her eyes dancing.

"Adrian!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you come sooner? I've been expecting you for the last hour."

His grave, set expression filled her with a vague fear. There seemed a curious menace about it. The welcoming hands dropped limply and hung down at full length.

"Adrian!" she faltered, "why do you look at me like that?"

Her hands went out to him again, but he ignored them with a gesture.

"Where's Miss Assheton?" he demanded.

She quailed before the hard ring in his voice. It was only

for a moment, however. A steely glint came into her own eyes, and she drew herself up sharply. She even tried to laugh, but it was not a very successful effort.

"What an extraordinary question, Mr. Merrick!"

Adrian's fingers closed round the letter he was holding. He advanced a step nearer and looked her full in the face.

"Extraordinary or not, you will be good enough to answer my question."

Mrs. Bellingham bit her lip, but she spoke steadily enough.

"Suppose we sit down," she said suavely, as she moved to a chair.

"I prefer to stand," replied Adrian. "Kindly tell me at once where Miss Assheton is. I hear that you've dismissed her at an hour's notice."

A little silvery ripple of laughter broke from the other's lips.

"For goodness' sake don't look so tragic, my friend. And don't talk in that ridiculous melodramatic manner, either. It's like a Surrey-side hero, and doesn't suit you at all. As for Miss Assheton's whereabouts, I neither know nor care. Still, I don't mind telling you—as you seem to have been misinformed on the subject—that I have not dismissed the lady in whom you appear to take so much interest. She saved me the trouble of doing so by resigning on her own account."

"I don't believe you."

Mrs. Bellingham laughed again; but it was an angry laugh this time.

"Really!" she returned. "I can't congratulate you on the effect that a trip to Paris has had on your manners. Why is it that you find it so difficult to believe me all of a sudden?"

"Because I've just received a letter from Miss Assheton. It was sent on to the theatre here from my rooms at Bristol."

"Ah, so you keep up a correspondence, do you? This is quite touching. And what does Miss Assheton say?"

"Nothing at all."

Mrs. Bellingham looked up quickly.

"Nothing?" she repeated. "I don't understand."

Adrian laughed grimly.

"It's easily explained. This makes it clear, I think."

He took an envelope from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"This is the letter which you wrote to me last Wednesday night—the night before I went to Paris. As it was enclosed in an envelope addressed to Miss Assheton she received it instead of me. I found it waiting for me here when I arrived, five minutes ago."

Mrs. Bellingham glanced at the note idly.

"Well," she observed, with a magnificent gesture of unconcern, "what else did you expect? If a letter intended for you went to her by mistake, the least she could do would be to send it back again. Even young women of Miss Assheton's type may be counted upon to do the obvious thing occasionally. And, now," she continued, with a sudden change of manner, "I should be glad to know why you're making such a ridiculous fuss about all this? What is Miss Assheton to you, pray?"

What was she to him, indeed? He smiled at the question, in spite of his pain.

"Everything," he answered simply.

The other started at the answer as if struck by a blow. A faint cry, half anguish, half defiance, came from her parted lips. The carefully guarded mask slipped away, and her face worked strangely. It grew suddenly old, and took on an ashen hue, save in the centre where two bright spots of rouge glowed in sharp contrast to the deadly whiteness of the remainder. The rounded cheeks fell in, and the fine lines about her mouth deepened, as she realized that the answer she had been dreading so long had come at last in all its stunning intensity. She tried to shut her ears to it, but the attempt failed.

"Everything," he repeated slowly. "Everything in all the world."

The words wrung a cry from their hearer's lips.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, in a tone of such poignant anguish that her listener started in turn. "Don't say that, Adrian! It isn't true—it can't be true. I won't believe it!"

Her voice trailed off into a little choking sob, and her whole being seemed shaken with emotion. She buried her face in her hands, her body rocking to and fro. Then, steadying herself with a supreme effort, she flung out her arms and caught him by the sleeve.

"Don't say it, Adrian!" she wailed. "You don't love her really. You know you don't!"

He disengaged himself gently. Even in his anger he wished to spare her as much as possible. But it was of no avail. She clung to him desperately, her arms twining about him with a grip that would not be denied. Her hair brushed against his cheeks, and her breath fanned him in little quick, eager gasps. Under stress of emotion the colour was coming back into her strained, intent face, and her lips were like two livid streaks. Heedless of the consequence, she let her voice rise, the words pouring forth in an impetuous torrent.

"Adrian," she cried, "don't say you love her. Say anything but that, and I shan't mind. Oh! you can't love her really. You can't! You can't! She is nothing but a mere girl, and doesn't know how to love. I'm a woman, and I can give you what she will never be able to. Listen to me, Adrian. Listen, dear! I'll do any single thing you ask me if you'll only say you care for me a little. Oh, Adrian, I want you so much!"

He recoiled at the words, and pushed her from him almost brutally.

"*Oh, Adrian, I want you so much!*" Dear God! who was it had said that last?

His brain reeled at the memory, and for a moment a mist swam before him. The horror of it sickened him. It seemed nothing less than sacrilege that this painted, scheming, false-hearted, evil-minded woman should dare to repeat

such words. A black rage filled his whole being. Any feeling that he might once have felt for her was now utterly swept away. Oh, if only she had been a man, that he might have exacted his just vengeance!

She shuddered as she saw the change in his eyes, but she made one last desperate effort.

"Adrian!" she pleaded—and her voice was like a thin wire swaying in the wind—"don't look at me like that. I can't bear it! Surely you realize that Constance Assheton doesn't care for you. She wouldn't have gone away like this without a word if she did. She was tired of you, and went up to London to accept another and a better engagement."

"Where is she?" he demanded hoarsely. "How dare you tell me these lies!"

Another change came over her face. The convulsive working ceased. Her whole form stiffened perceptibly, and her eyes flashed. The tenderness had gone out of them completely. A note of deadly calmness came into her voice.

"Let us settle this matter at once," she said, rising and walking back to the table.

He looked at her inquiringly, but she met his gaze with a harsh laugh.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it? If you think I'm going to be thrown over in this manner by a mere chit of a girl, you're entirely mistaken. I can make every allowance, but there's a limit even to my patience. Come, I'll give you two minutes to make up your mind. You will then choose definitely between Miss Assheton and myself."

Adrian picked up his hat and faced her steadily.

"Thank you. One will be enough."

She saw his meaning, and smiled grimly.

"Very well, then. I hope you'll be satisfied with your bargain. If you're not, don't ask me to put things back on their old footing. You will also understand that I no longer require you in my company."

"Quite so. I shall leave Manchester to-night."

He went towards the door, but she called him back.

"One moment, Mr. Merrick. I've no use for this now. You'd better take it with you."

She held up a packet lying on the table. Adrian recognised it as the typescript of his one-act play, "Fancy Free," on which he had once built such high hopes. Now they were vanished, with everything else.

"Put it in the fire," he said shortly.

Mrs. Bellingham shrugged her shoulders.

"As you please. It's a pity that the company have commenced studying their parts already, though. However, I'll call them in at once. By the way, where shall I send you a cheque for the fortnight's salary you're entitled to in lieu of notice?"

"Send it to the devil," returned Adrian fiercely, "and go there yourself!"

# XXX

ADRIAN went up to London by the night mail. He had a carriage to himself all the way, but he did not want for companionship on the journey. Hard, bitter thoughts filled his brain as he sat staring out of the window into the rushing darkness. The little wayside stations through which the train dashed with a shriek and roar, and the crowded platforms it drew up alongside for a few brief, panting moments at Crewe, Stafford, and Rugby, left no impression on his mind. It had no room for any other thought just then but the one that he had lost Constance. He had lost her utterly. She had renounced him of her own accord. She had judged him unheard, not waiting to learn what he had to say in his own defence, or even giving him a chance of making one. All her protestations then were false. She had never really cared for him, or she would have trusted him now. The thought was torture. It clung to him as a shirt of Nessus from which there was no escape.

"Traitress!" he muttered fiercely. "Oh, my God! and to think that I ever believed in her!"

Gradually the swaying of the carriage soothed him. His quivering nerves calmed down a little. He had been travelling almost without a pause since the previous day, and had not slept for thirty hours. In spite of himself his tired eyes closed, and by degrees he sank into a fitful slumber. As he dreamed, leaning back in a corner against the hard cushions, the first sharpness of his pain left him. Once he even smiled. He was on Clifton Downs again, and Constance—the dear, tender Constance to whom he had given all his

love—was beside him. He saw the shy glory in her sweet face, and heard the grave tenderness in her soft voice, as she told him that his own love was returned, that her heart was his, now and always.

He sat up as the train stopped with a sudden jerk at Willesden. The vision left him swiftly, and he was wide awake again. He felt strangely comforted, however. Surely Constance could be no traitress. His gentle, trusting Constance, who had plighted him her troth only five days ago, a traitress—the idea was impossible! He would write to her at once, telling her everything, and in two days' time at the latest he would have her answer.

From Euston he drove straight to the little private hotel in Down Street where he had lived before. He hugged a faint hope to himself as the cab crawled through the gloom that a letter from Constance might be waiting for him there. She knew his London address, and must also have felt certain that he would not stop in Manchester a moment after he had discovered that she was no longer a member of the company. It was only a faint hope, but there was a measure of comfort in it all the same.

There was nothing for him, however, announced the hotel porter, as he put the eager inquiry the moment he stepped out on to the pavement.

Adrian went upstairs, feeling a little disheartened. Then, refusing all offers of food with a vehemence that made the waiter look at him in pained surprise, he sat down and wrote to Constance. The letter was a long one, for he had much to say, and it seemed best to put down everything from the very beginning. He would keep nothing back—the whole grim story from the very moment of making Mrs. Bellingham's acquaintance should be described in detail. As his pen flew over the paper he saw things clearly that had puzzled him before. A thousand little points in connexion with Mrs. Bellingham's attitude towards himself on various occasions, and of which he had taken no particular notice at the time, were now full of significance. In his sharpened intelligence

nothing escaped him. Oh, fool and blind that he had been hitherto! No wonder Constance thought the worst of him. Well, to-morrow they would be able to laugh over things together.

To-morrow! It was nearly that already. He looked at his watch and began to calculate when he might hear from her. It was midnight now. The letter would be delivered at eight o'clock in the morning, and she would answer it at once. But Kennington was a long way from Down Street, and he could scarcely hope her reply to reach him before twelve, or even later.

The sharp pattering of the rain on his bedroom window woke him early the next morning. He sprang out of bed and gazed anxiously down the street. Its depressing spectacle made him shiver. It was a dismal day, with leaden skies overhead, and dripping pavements underfoot. At the corner he could just catch a glimpse of the Green Park. The few trees that were visible swayed in the wind, and looked strangely forlorn and melancholy as their sodden leaves swept against the railings. A policeman, in dripping oil-skins, was trying to get a little shelter under an adjacent doorway, while a wretched tramp slouched miserably along in the gutter.

Adrian surveyed the scene with disgust. It promised badly for the day on which he had built so much.

"Ugh! what the hell of a morning!" he murmured.

With his shaving water the chambermaid brought him up a bulky packet. The post had arrived, she said, but this was all that had come.

As he turned the long envelope over he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment, for the Manchester postmark and the sprawling irregular handwriting told him that it was not Constance who had written. It was too early, of course, for an answer to his own letter of the previous day, but he had hoped all the same to have heard from her by this time. His present correspondent, he knew, was Mrs. Bellingham.

He glanced at the envelope doubtfully, half inclined to

throw it into the fire unread. Then curiosity prevailed, and, tearing the flap open, he drew out the contents. It was a typed copy of his one-act play, He stared at the pages and turned them over mechanically. As he did so, he noticed a folded strip of pink paper nestling among them. Smoothing it out he saw that it was a cheque for six pounds. Pinned to it was a card, inscribed "'Two weeks' salary in lieu of notice. With Mrs. Bellingham's compliments."

At the sight all his old anger returned. Tearing the cheque down the centre, he crumpled it up into a ball and then flung it with an oath among the blazing coals. For the moment he felt inclined to throw the play after it. Indeed, he picked up the typed sheets to do so. Then a new thought struck him, and he put the pages back into their envelope.

"I don't see why 'Fancy Free' should be sacrificed," he murmured. "It never did any harm."

He went downstairs to the coffee-room and tried to breakfast, but the mere effort of eating almost choked him. As he sent dish after dish away untouched, the waiter began to look distressed. Adrian's appetite hitherto had never left anything to be desired.

"Care to see the morning paper, sir?" he remarked deferentially. "Long account of the bank smash in the 'Daily Mail,' sir."

"Damn the paper!"

"Yes, sir. Quite so, sir. Thought you might like to see it, though. The old gent on the first floor was usin' 'orrid langwidge about it when Jane took it up to 'im with his morning tea just now. I think 'e must 'av 'ad a bit put away in the concern, for 'is very words was 'Damn the paper!'—just as you said yourself, sir."

He flicked an imaginary fly off the corner of the table, and then, giving up the attempt to sustain a conversation any longer, glided silently away.

Adrian looked at the rain-splashed street, debating how to fill in the time. It was no use leaving the house. For one

thing, the steady downpour made such a proceeding almost impossible; and for another, he had no one to see if he did go out. Both Marchmont and Deane were away, and, with the solitary exception of Harrison Elliott, he knew nobody else. It was as likely as not, too, that the dramatist would be absent from town. Indeed, he remembered reading only a few days ago that Elliott had started on a yachting cruise.

Presently another train of thoughts began to occupy him. Now that he was out of an engagement he must obtain a fresh one as soon as possible. He could not afford to be idle any length of time.

He sent out for a "Stage" and began to study the advertisements. They did not seem very promising, for even to his untrained eye several of them obviously emanated from sharks. For example, the glowing promises they held out were all made conditional upon the ability of applicants to furnish premiums. "Experience unnecessary, but small investment required," he read over and over again. The few that did not expressly stipulate for this he put aside for further consideration. One read, "Wanted, through leaving, Robust Gent for Heavies. Sobriety and Good Wardrobe indispensable. Drunkards save stamps." Another went more into details — "Wanted (through obliging brother manager), Smart Young Gent to tour the smalls in 'The Worst Woman of the Lot' Company. Acknowledged London Success. Comfortable shop, and long engagement to suitable man. Money low, but sure. Also required, Dashing Young Lady for Soubrette in 'Audrey the Actress' Co. No back numbers need apply. Send last two refs. (which will be inquired into) and photo in tights."

"I'm afraid I'm not a smart young gent," reflected Adrian disconsolately. "I must try something else."

He ran his eye carelessly down the column headed "Artistes Wanted." There was only one announcement in the entire list that seemed at all promising. It read, "Required Artists, all lines (Ladies and Gents). Must dress well both on and off, and not be afraid of work. No fancy

salaries, but good money for the right sort. Stamp for interview. Montague Hyem, the Reliable Agency, 27A Waterloo Road. N.B.—Beware of Bogus Firms."

With the idea of giving the enterprising Mr. Hyem a trial if nothing better presented itself, he cut out the advertisement.

After a time the lonely coffee-room began to get on his nerves. The fire smoked, and the two or three people sitting round it looked so dismal that he felt it impossible to stop in the place any longer. He went upstairs, accordingly, and tried to occupy himself with unpacking. When he had finished he ordered luncheon. Just as he was going down to the meal, however, there came a tap at the door and the servant entered with a letter.

He seized it eagerly, for his quick eye caught the Kennington postmark, and the address was in Constance's writing. It was as much as he could do to wait until the maid had left the room before tearing it open.

With trembling fingers, and a heart that beat furiously, he ripped up the flap and drew out the contents, another and smaller envelope. The next moment it had dropped on the table and he was staring at it, stupefied. He could scarcely believe his eyes, but the enclosure was the letter which he himself had sent to Constance the night before. It had not been opened, the seal was unbroken, and across the front was written, in a hand that he could not mistake, the one word, "Refused."

He sat staring at the envelope where it lay, trying to collect his thoughts. Surely, it was some hideous mistake. But no, his eyes had not been deceived. There was the grim fact in all its horrible reality, and nothing would alter it. Constance had returned his letter, declining to read it even.

As the realization of what her action meant forced itself upon him, he laughed bitterly. Constance had chosen to think the worst of him. She was ready to judge him unheard, without giving him an opportunity of saying a

word in his own defence. And only five days ago—or was it five years?—she had sworn to trust him for ever!

He writhed as the memory of that golden afternoon came back to him.

"Traitress!" he cried again. "And I thought she cared for me!"

His restless glance, sweeping round the room, was caught by a photograph on the mantelpiece. It was of Constance. He had unpacked it and placed it there only half an hour before. As he gazed intently at it, some of the bitterness went out of his face. A thousand little shafts of memory pricked him. Constance had always been gracious, and tender, and trusting. It was impossible that she could be a traitress now. He began to find excuses for her. Certainly, things must have looked very black against him. Piecing the long chain of evidence together, he saw his own conduct for the first time in a new light. Only two or three hours after he had told her he loved her, he had broken his appointment to see her home and had spent the time in Mrs. Bellingham's society instead. Then, the very next morning, he had gone away altogether, without a word, and had remained away for several days, during which he had not written. How could she think he really cared for her? And then there was Mrs. Bellingham's letter to him which had fallen into her hands. After what it said it must have come to her as a terrible awakening.

No, it was not Constance, but Mrs. Bellingham, who was the traitress. He saw it all now, and cursed himself for not having done so before. From the first Mrs. Bellingham had hated Constance, and had schemed and planned to keep him apart from her. It was with this end in view that she had sent him to Paris, and extorted from him the promise both to keep his journey a secret and to refrain from writing to any one but herself. Then, while he was away, she had taken advantage of his absence to dismiss Constance. As for her statement that Constance had resigned of her own free will, he did not believe it. Pressure had been put upon her, and

she had tendered her resignation merely because actual dismissal would prevent her obtaining a fresh engagement elsewhere.

A blind fury shook him as he realized the full significance of Mrs. Bellingham's diabolical scheme.

It might be undone even yet, though. At any rate, he would make the attempt. Constance might refuse his letter, but she could not refuse to see him.

Firm in his new resolve, he left the hotel, heedless of the pelting rain. At the corner of the street he hailed a cab and told the driver to take him to the Kennington address. The horse seemed to crawl, and a dozen times he shouted to the man to go faster. A block on Westminster Bridge brought him almost to the verge of desperation. He was about to get out and continue the journey on foot, when the policeman controlling the traffic gave the signal to start again.

As the cab drew up at the house in Park Grove he jumped down and rang the bell furiously. The moving of a curtain in the ground-floor window sent the blood coursing through him. Constance had seen his arrival, he felt sure, and in another moment he would be with her. As he looked, however, he saw a large and not over clean hand pull the curtain aside, and an ample form interpose itself against the glass. It was withdrawn so quickly that he could not make out who it belonged to, but he felt that its owner was certainly not Constance.

The next minute the door opened, and he found himself confronting the landlady. Mrs. Waggett was evidently not in the best of tempers, and Adrian felt his hopes sink as he noted her injured expression.

"No," she replied tartly in answer to his eager inquiry, "Miss Assheton is not in."

"When will she be back, then?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. And wot's more, young man, I don't care much, either."

Adrian started at the reply.

"Has she left you, then?" he demanded. "Surely she was here this morning?"

"Yes," returned Mrs. Waggett, seizing at the opportunity to expatiate upon her grievances, "she was 'ere this morning, but she ain't 'ere now. At eleven o'clock she rang 'er bell as cool as you please, and told me she was going away. 'Where to, miss?' says I, quite friendly like. 'That's my business,' says she. And not another word could I get out of 'er, for with that she ups and packs 'er boxes and drives away 'arf an hour later in a four-wheel cab. A nice way to be'ave to me, I must say, for I'd naturally looked on 'er as a permanent, considering as 'ow she always kept 'er rooms on while she was away on tour. But there, you can never trust young women. I always thought from the first that she'd be playing some trick like this on me before long. And now my words 'as come right."

Adrian clutched at a chair standing in the narrow little hall. Constance gone away! Here, indeed, was his last hope shattered.

"Don't you know Miss Assheton's new address?" he asked faintly.

Mrs. Waggett sniffed.

"No, I don't," she returned in an injured tone. "I told you so just now, didn't I?"

There was nothing to be gained by further questioning. Mechanically he got into the cab again, and ordered the driver to return to Down Street. A passing newsboy guarded the wheel officiously, and, when Adrian thrust him aside, brandished a sodden pile of papers in his face.

"Extry 'Star,' sir, 'Pall Mall,' or 'Westminster'? 'Orrid murder an' sooicide in Brixton! Shockin' West End scandal! Football Special, an' latest about the Bank Smash!"

With an oath, Adrian drew the folding doors together and leaned back in a corner, noticing neither the rain that beat in upon his face nor the raucous shouts of the newsboy that floated after him down the street.

# XXXI

THE cab seemed to stifle him, while the ceaseless rattling of the horse's hoofs beat into his brain with a persistency that was almost beyond endurance. At last, unable to bear it any longer, he told the driver to stop, preferring to walk the remainder of the journey. The rain had ceased by this time, but the pavements still ran with water, and great puddles of mud formed at every crossing. He trudged on, however, unheedingly, splashed by passing omnibuses, and jostled by streams of homeward-bound workers, for he took no notice of any one. He walked, indeed, as in a dream, and until he reached Down Street again was hardly conscious how he got there.

A chambermaid, alarmed by his appearance, suggested hot drinks, a change of clothing, and a fire.

"Lor', sir, but you do look wet!" she exclaimed sympathetically.

"Never mind," he returned. "I'm going out again directly."

The girl stared at him in wonder, but he took no notice. He thanked her, however, as she lit a fire of her own accord, and again when five minutes later she entered the room with a steaming glass of punch. He drained it off eagerly, for he was chilled to the bone, and the generous measure of spirit put fresh life into him.

Changing his clothes he began to debate how to pass the long evening. To stop indoors until bedtime was impossible. He must go out—anywhere. Even the streets were better than the loneliness of the hotel.

An hour later he found himself near Leicester Square. The flaring lights of a huge music-hall lit up the darkness, and long rows of many-coloured lamps twinkled over the portico. At the entrance a stream of cabs disgorged a succession of occupants, while interested passers-by examined the framed photographs of scantily dressed ladies plastered on either side of the gaping doorway.

He looked round the foyer with disgust. The place, with its garish lights and gilded ceiling, its artificial palms and sham marble pillars, was gaudy and vulgar in the extreme. It resembled more than anything else an up-to-date gin palace, upholstered according to the riotous fancy of a Tottenham Court Road expert. Photographs of red-nosed comedians and female acrobats—clothed in little beyond a smile and a garter—leered from the walls. At the foot of the stairs leading to the grand circle stood the manager, talking to a woman who had just come in. He was a big, stout man, with a gross, sensual face. A jewelled stud, almost as large as a decanter stopper, transfixed his gleaming shirt front, and a diamond ring glistened on the not overclean forefinger with which he was playfully tapping his companion's shoulder. Across his white waistcoat sprawled a thick gold chain, and a crimson silk handkerchief was stuffed into the opening. He wore a silk hat cocked rakishly over one ear, and had a bunch of gardenias pinned into the lapel of his dress-coat.

"Ugh! What an unutterable bounder!" thought Adrian as he passed him.

He went into the stalls and tried to concentrate his attention on the stage. The performance, however, bored him unutterably, and as "turn" after "turn" was arrived at he grew more and more disgusted. Finally, the inane antics of a couple of "knockabout comedians" drove him into the bar, until their item should be concluded. When he came back again, ten minutes later, a shrill-voiced woman in flesh-coloured tights and a yellow wig was bawling out a senti-

mental ditty. The words of the idiotic refrain were taken up as a chorus by the pit and gallery.

*Could you be true to eyes of blue,*
*And hair like yellow corn?*

demanded the singer archly, and an enraptured audience repeated the question with vigour.

"*Eyes of blue, and hair like yellow corn!*" Something tugged at his heartstrings, and left them raw and bleeding. He looked at his programme and saw the name against the item—"Miss Constance Plantagenet, the Favourite Serio-Comique."

Constance! That painted, simpering, half-naked travesty of a woman to be called Constance! It was an outrage!

Somebody in the stall immediately behind, smoking an evil-smelling cigarette, leaned forward and nudged him familiarly.

"That's Connie Plantagenet," he observed. "Bit of a fair knock-out, ain't she?"

The speaker's voice seemed vaguely familiar. Turning round sharply, Adrian saw the smirking Raphael Montagu. The recognition was mutual.

Mrs. Bellingham's Press representative regarded him with a fawning smile.

"Hullo, Merrick, old chap!" he exclaimed. "Thought I spotted you, but I wasn't certain till you turned round. Come and 'ave—I mean have—a gentle drink with me. I'm feeling rather frail this evening, and I think a Johnny Walker would buck me up."

Adrian's answering glance was far from encouraging, but Mr. Montagu was not easily discomfited.

"Perhaps later on, then?" he continued. "In the meantime, allow me to introduce my lady friend, Miss Flossie St. Aubyn, also of the Profesh. Flossie, my dear, this is Mr. Adrian Merrick, leading gent in Mrs. Bellingham's Co."

A flashily dressed and much bepowdered young woman sitting beside him giggled and extended her hand.

"Pleased to meet you," she remarked, with a simper.

Adrian bowed stiffly and, leaving his seat, walked deliberately away.

The lady gazed after him, a bright spot of colour burning on her painted cheeks.

"Got a bit of a side on him, Monty," she murmured. "Fancies himself no end, I'll go bail."

"Not 'arf," was the reply. "I'd like to take him down a peg or two. I wonder what he's doing in town, though? He ought to be with the company at Manchester this week. It would serve him jolly well right if he's got the sack. There's no chance of that, though, so long as he's Mrs. B.'s fancy man."

Sublimely indifferent to the criticisms he was exciting, Adrian went upstairs and stood at the back of the promenade. The narrow space, reeking with the fumes of spirits and tobacco, was crowded with patrons, the greater portion of whom were women. With their fixed smiles, quick, eager glances, and stereotyped expressions of forced gaiety, they all bore a horrible resemblance to one another. Some of them were middle-aged—these received the answering scrutiny of the men as though it were a compliment—but others were quite young—one or two apparently mere girls —and shrank timidly away when spoken to. But on the faces of all—old and young alike—was a sinister stamp. He felt nauseated when he saw it.

The passing to and fro of the ever-shifting crowd gave him an occasional glimpse of the stage. Through a wedge-like opening that formed a gangway from the back of the promenade to the front of the balcony he could just see over the heads of the orchestra. Facing the conductor's desk stood a fat tenor, who, bathed in a flood of limelight, with the Union Jack for a background, was bawling out a patriotic song. He appeared to have the lungs of an overfed bull, for the inane words rose high above the crash of brass and roll of drum, and refused even to be drowned by the laughter and talk that went on uninterruptedly in the adjacent bar.

*We thought that some were chappies,*
*And afraid to have a row;*
*We thought that some were boobies,*
*Only fit to guide a plough.*
*But the lads in khaki showed 'em*
*That they could man the guns;*
*And the boys who fight from morn till night*
*Are still Old England's sons!*

Such a burst of applause rent the air that an encore seemed seriously threatened. Adrian half rose, determined to leave the place rather than hear another verse. The next moment, however, the curtain descended abruptly, as an intimation that the "turn" was completed.

He heaved a sigh of relief and resumed his seat. As he did so, a girl, who had been wandering backwards and forwards in apparently aimless fashion, stopped and looked at him with a glance of mingled shyness and defiance. She was quite young, and rather pretty, while her face was nearly free from the thick coating of paint and powder that marked almost all the other women.

Adrian moved aside mechanically, and she took the vacant seat beside him. He looked at her covertly, struck by the wistful expression in her eyes, and began to wonder what she was doing among these horrors. There seemed such a vast difference between her and the bedizened harpies who talked and laughed with the half-drunken men and vapid youths lounging about the promenade.

A gorgeous flunkey came up, carrying a brandy and soda on a tray. Adrian took it and turned to the girl by his side.

"Have a drink?" he said shortly.

She smiled at the invitation, showing a row of white, even teeth.

"Thanks. I got wet through coming here, and I think a glass of port would do me good."

Adrian gave the order, and relapsed into gloomy silence. He had no desire to talk, for his mind was far away. He was thinking of the week that had just elapsed, and of all that had happened during it.

His companion began to speak of her own accord, but he scarcely listened. The effort of concentrating his attention was not worth it. Presently she rallied him on his preoccupation.

"What's the matter?" she demanded. "Have you got the hump?"

He nodded.

"Well, so have I. You needn't look it, though. Besides, you haven't as much to worry about as I have."

Adrian turned the reply over. It seemed to invite comment, but he refrained from making any.

"Have another drink?" he said.

The girl looked at him with an expression that struck him curiously. It seemed so wistful. Her eyes clouded, and something trembled in one of them. It almost looked like a tear.

"I say," she said, in a quick, hesitating voice, "you seem a good sort. I don't want anything to drink, but I'd be awfully glad of something to eat. I've had nothing since breakfast—and not too much of that."

Adrian shot a swift glance at her.

"Why not?"

The girl laughed, and played nervously with her rings.

"No money."

"Well, come and have some supper with me. We might go to Prince's. It's close by."

A tear rolled slowly down the other's cheek, and her lip trembled.

"I can't," she returned, with a little catch in her voice. "They wouldn't let me in there."

The tragic tone in which she spoke struck him sharply. He thought he had never heard anything quite so pathetic.

"I'm sorry," he replied gently. "There are lots of other places, though."

The girl brightened up instantly, and a wan smile came into her face.

"I know one just round the corner. There's plenty of time if we start now."

"All right. You show me the way."

The restaurant to which she led him was a little Italian establishment in Wardour Street. Outside the entrance was displayed a large board, inscribed "The Best Supper in London for Eighteenpence, bread included." A stout, smiling personage, wearing a greasy dress-suit, hovered in the doorway expectantly. He rubbed his hands and bowed when he saw Adrian.

"Good evening, sir," he remarked briskly. "You lika supper? All ready—ver' fine, and vat you call dam cheap!"

Piloted by his new acquaintance, Adrian entered and took a seat at an unoccupied table. The room was long and low and narrow, with a profusion of somewhat dingy mirrors, red plush, and gilding. It was crowded with people—mostly women—and the scent of cooking hung heavy over the whole place. Alert waiters, bearing piles of plates and dishes with the skill of professional jugglers, dexterously threaded their way among the tables, while the kitchen lift rattled ceaselessly up and down with fresh burdens. On every side rose a constant buzz of orders and popping of corks.

Adrian picked up the grimy menu and handed it to his guest. An obsequious waiter bent over him, breathing an odour of garlic and macaroni.

"You want private room, signor?" he whispered confidentially. "All ver' comfortable."

Then, frightened by the scowl with which the suggestion was met, he flourished a dirty wine card to and fro.

"Vat you lika drink? Claret, 'ock, or sauterne? Per'aps lady like champagne? You try Nosegay Brand. All gents say dam good."

"Oh, fetch whatever you like," replied Adrian, "and be quick about it."

He could scarcely touch the various dishes which made their appearance in quick succession, but the girl by his side amply made up for his neglect. She ate everything with an avidity that was almost painful to watch. It made him wonder when she had last had a good meal. After a single glass

he sent away the poisonous mixture that the imaginative waiter called "champagne," and ordered a bottle of port instead. Under its influence his companion's eyes began to sparkle, and a little glow of colour came back into her cheeks.

"Well," he demanded presently, "how do you feel now?"

The girl breathed a little sigh of content, and looked at him with a shy smile.

"Much better, thank you."

The refined accents in which she spoke touched on a chord of memory. Her voice reminded him vaguely of somebody else—somebody whom he wanted to forget. He looked at her questioningly, and she shrank back, colouring.

"Down on your luck?"

"Yes. London's a rotten place for girls. There's no chance here at all for some of us."

She spoke without any bitterness, he noticed, but simply as though stating an incontrovertible fact.

"Where do you live?"

"I've rooms in the Marylebone Road so long as I can pay the rent."

"And when you're behindhand?"

"Then I live where I can. That's what will happen to me next week, I expect, because I shall be cleaned out by Sunday."

Despite his own misery, Adrian could still feel for another. Her story was probably untrue, but that scarcely mattered. Besides, she was only a girl, and her violet eyes and gentle voice were like the eyes and voice of somebody else. For that other person's sake he could not judge her harshly. Although his heart was hard, there was a soft corner in it still.

He took a five-pound note from his pocket and pushed it across the table.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "Is this any use to you?"

The other's eyes glistened.

"Thank you," she returned. "You *are* good. Most men are such brutes to me!"

Adrian looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight, and already the room was becoming deserted.

"I must be off," he declared. "Come and have supper with me here again this day week, if you like."

The girl rose, and held out her hand shyly. "Good night," she said; "and thank you for being so kind. I don't think I'll come again, though, because I want to go away from London if I can."

A hansom, from which a patron had just been disgorged, was waiting outside. The man flicked his whip insinuatingly.

"Cab, sir?" he called out. "Drive the lydy 'ome, sir?"

"Get in," directed Adrian. "It's too late for a bus now."

A tout held open the door officiously, and, as Adrian paid the driver, lurched violently against him. The next moment he had taken to his heels, and was running swiftly down the street.

Adrian gazed at his retreating figure, wondering what he was in such a hurry about.

As he passed the Criterion bar a few minutes later, he thought he would go in for half an hour. The place looked bright and cheerful, and was certainly more attractive than his bedroom would be. A tall barmaid, with beautifully dressed hair and a superb figure, leaned over the counter and smiled at him invitingly.

"'Ullo, dearie!" she exclaimed, her eyes resting on him with evident approval. "What's yours? It strikes me as though a drop of old Scotch would do you good."

Then she turned to another customer, a fatuous-looking youth, waiting beside him.

"Now then, my lad, you've 'ad about as much as you can carry, so off you go!"

The youth, who had been rejoicing in the lady's smiles a moment before, scowled when he saw the ready transference of her affections, and went sulkily away.

Although he had eaten scarcely anything during the day, Adrian had swallowed considerably more alcohol than he was accustomed to. His head ached from the single glass of

the "Nosegay Brand" on which he had ventured, and the poisonous reek of the cheap cigarettes which every one was smoking around him made his eyes smart. As he went out into the open air his legs felt a little unsteady, and he experienced some difficulty in avoiding bumping up against every one he passed. The gleaming lights of Piccadilly dazzled him.

"I believe I'm pretty nearly screwed," he reflected, as he tried vainly to light a cigar.

He hailed a cab and drove back to Down Street. Arrived there he stumbled upstairs to his bedroom, and looked at himself in the glass.

"More than nearly screwed," he muttered, throwing himself into a chair. "Quite screwed, in fact. I wonder what the time is?"

He felt for his watch mechanically. The next moment he started up and was staring into the mirror again. The sight of a broken link dangling from the end of his chain sobered him completely.

"I've been robbed!" he exclaimed. "That infernal cab tout at the restaurant must have stolen it when he jostled me! However, I've got the number in my pocket-book. Hullo, that's gone, too!"

He searched every pocket rapidly, but without effect. There was no mistake about it, the book had been stolen. It was a serious loss, for it contained twenty-five pounds in notes that he had brought away with him from Manchester.

"Just my damned luck!" he muttered grimly. "I suppose it serves me right for spending my time like this."

# XXXII

ADRIAN woke the next morning with a splitting headache and a tongue like a piece of soapy flannel. Evidently, indulgence in the "Nosegay Brand" of champagne required a special training, and digestive organs capable of appreciating an eighteenpenny supper at an Italian restaurant were other than normal ones.

He breakfasted in his room off a bottle of soda water, and began to reflect how to get through the day. The first thing to do would be to obtain some work. With this end in view, he decided to call at once on one of the agents whose address he had noted in the "Stage." The first need, however, was some money for current expenses, since the loss of his pocket-book left him with only a trifle in hand. Fortunately, he could still write a cheque.

With trembling fingers he made out one for ten pounds and sent it down to the office by a chambermaid. There would be no difficulty in cashing it, as he was well known in the hotel.

Five minutes later the girl returned. There was a curious expression on her face. Instinctively it made Adrian uncomfortable.

"Well, where's the money?" he demanded.

The maid hesitated.

"If you please, sir, Mr. Mulenkamp says will you kindly step downstairs and see him for a moment?"

"I'm hanged if I will!" returned Adrian shortly. "Tell Mr. Mulenkamp that if he wants to see me he can come here."

The girl disappeared, leaving Adrian fuming with indignation.

"It's like old What's-his-name's impudence to think I'm going to wait on him!" he muttered. "What next, I wonder?"

There came a tap at the door and Mr. Mulenkamp, the proprietor of the hotel, entered the room. He was a middle-aged individual of German nationality, and spoke English with a strong accent. His face was exceedingly grave, and in one hand he held a narrow strip of pink paper. Adrian saw at a glance that it was his own cheque. He wondered what it meant.

"Well?" he said quickly. "What do you want to see me about?"

The other put the cheque down on the table.

"I am sorry, but I cannot cash this."

Adrian stared at him in amazement.

"Why the devil not? What's the matter with it?"

"No goot," was the prompt reply.

"What on earth do you mean?"

The proprietor shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating gesture.

"You 'ave not seen ze newspapers, then? Zoh, it was as I did think. This cheque is drawn on the Cape Imperial Bank, and the Cape Imperial Bank 'as—what you call it?—smashed—yesterday. It is in ze 'Telegraph' this morning."

He unfolded a copy of the paper as he spoke, and pointed to a paragraph on the centre page, headed "Colonial Bank Suspension." Adrian devoured it eagerly.

> "With reference to the suspension of the Cape Imperial Bank, which was announced in London yesterday afternoon, our representative in Cape Town cables that the total amount now found to be involved is very much larger than was at first anticipated. According to the auditors' preliminary report, grave irregularities in the management have been disclosed. The chief cashier and two officials are under arrest."

He gazed at the paragraph, stupefied. The walls of the room rocked, and a mist rose before him. When it cleared away, he saw the other's grave face regarding him with an expression of genuine concern.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Merrick, that this Gottbedampt bank is no longer any goot," he was saying. "What you do now, hein?"

Adrian reflected for a moment. He was trying to get his thoughts together.

"I don't know," he returned slowly. "I shall have to leave you, I suppose. The fact is, I can't afford to stop here any longer."

Herr Mulenkamp waved the suggestion airily away. Adrian had spent money freely in his establishment, and he did not wish to lose him altogether. Besides, there was always a chance that things would look up again.

"You can stop in ze 'otel another week or two," he replied, "and my leetle bill shall wait. And you can store your luggage 'ere, too."

Adrian shook his head.

"Thanks very much, but I think I'd better go to-morrow, at any rate."

The proprietor sighed in gentle resignation. All Englishmen were undoubtedly mad, and to his Teutonic mind this one seemed madder than any. Under the circumstances, perhaps it would be better if he did leave the establishment.

Left to himself, Adrian began to review the situation gloomily. It was not a hopeful one. He was dependent upon the Cape Imperial Bank for his entire income, and with its failure all his resources were swallowed up. The twenty-five pounds which, together with his watch, he had lost on the previous evening, were as nothing compared with this new misfortune. He cursed his luck savagely. It was out altogether. First Constance, then his engagement in Mrs. Bellingham's company, involving the suspension of the negotiations for the production of his play; and now

his income. He wondered bitterly what Fortune's next blow would be.

Worrying would not mend matters, though. The remainder of the long day would have to be got through somehow. Suddenly, an idea struck him. He would call on one of the agents whose advertisement he had noticed in the "Stage" and copied down. One of them had an office near the Strand. What was his name? Yes, here it was—"Montague Hyem, the Reliable Agency, 27A Waterloo Road."

With some difficulty, for the place was hidden modestly away between a pawnbroker's shop and a public-house, he discovered the address. Its dingy and depressing exterior did not hold out much promise of flourishing business being transacted within, but he knew that such establishments were not usually remarkable for their architectural graces. Without thinking anything more about it, accordingly, he went up the dirty uncarpeted staircase and entered a small room furnished like an office. The walls were apparently papered with photographs of theatrical celebrities—chiefly stout ladies in tights, and red-nosed comedians in women's skirts—while an assortment of framed cast-lists leaned against the mantelpiece. Seated at a desk beside the fireplace was a brisk, Hebraic-looking man, with a blue chin and a profusion of diamond rings.

He shot a swift glance at his visitor, and put down the letter he had been reading.

"Mr. Montague Hyem?" inquired Adrian diffidently.

"That's me, dear boy! Monty to my pals, and Mr. Hyem to the rest of the gay world. And what can I 'ave the pleasure of doing for you? Come after a shop, eh? Well, I'm not sure that I can do anything just now."

"I saw your advertisement in the 'Stage,'" returned Adrian, feeling disgusted already at the other's familiarity. "I understood from it that you wanted people. However, as this is not the case, I won't detain you."

Mr. Hyem rose hastily from his chair, and laid a detaining hand on Adrian's arm.

"'Ere, 'arf a mo!" he exclaimed. "There's no occasion to be so 'asty, is there? Let's 'ave a little talk first."

Adrian sat down, while the other ran an approving eye over him. Aspirants of this one's stamp seldom penetrated into his office.

"Well," he continued, as he finished his scrutiny, "I dare say I might fix you up with something, if you're not too particular."

"I'm not at all particular."

"Ah! And what might your line be?"

"Anything that's going."

The agent fumbled among his papers, and appeared to be lost in thought.

"I see," he returned. "And what about experience? You've done a bit of play-acting, I suppose?"

"Yes, I've been in Mrs. Bellingham's company since June. I've just resigned."

The other seemed surprised at the answer.

"Whatever did you go and do that for?" he demanded.

"That's my business."

"All right, dear boy, I don't want to pry into what doesn't concern me. Between two gentlemen, though, you'd be quite safe in telling me. I suppose you found Mrs. B. up to her old tricks? Bless you! I could tell you some pretty stories about 'er if I wasn't too much of a gentleman."

Adrian, however, did not feel inclined to receive any confidences.

"Suppose you tell me what you can do for me, instead?" he observed quietly.

"Yes, quite so," returned the agent, becoming businesslike again. "Now, what do you say to panto—or perhaps musical comedy? A good-looking young chap like you would get to the front in no time."

Adrian's face fell.

"I don't think a musical piece would suit me."

"Well, I tell you what," returned the other with laboured

sarcasm, "I'll get Mr. Pinero or Henry Arthur Jones, Esq., to write a play specially for you."

"Don't play the fool!" replied Adrian shortly. "I've come here to talk business."

"All right, no offence. Speaking of musical comedy, though, it's the only thing that's going at this moment. Now, I've a gentleman friend who 'appens to want a few good voices for a new musical piece that he's sending out on tour in about a fortnight's time. If you can sing at all I'll get him to take you. Come, what do you say? As a matter of fact, that was what my advertisement referred to."

Adrian reflected for a moment. Musical comedy was rather a come down after all his high aspirations, but he couldn't afford to be particular. Besides, it would only be a stop-gap, and later on he would surely find something better.

"Very well," he said, "I'll take it."

Mr. Hyem beamed.

"Right-ho! Well, take this card and any song you like, and go down to the Prince's Theatre at twelve o'clock to-morrow for a voice trial. Ask for yours truly when you arrive. If you get taken on I shall want ten per cent for my little commission. And now, just as a matter of form, sign this paper. It will put things on a business footing. Lord! if only I 'ad your figure and looks I'd be at the 'ead of the Profesh before I was a year older."

Adrian signed the grimy sheet of paper which the other thrust before him, and left the office hurriedly. The agent's personality offended every instinct he possessed. He wanted to be in the fresh air again.

As he walked up the Waterloo Road, he noticed a card inscribed "Lodgings for Single Gentlemen" displayed in a window. The house looked fairly clean—by comparison, at any rate, with its neighbours—and he could probably live there cheaply. He rang the bell, and asked to see what there was to let. A frowsy little maid-of-all-work conducted him to a small room on the third floor. After a brief in-

spection he decided to take it, and inquired the rent. It was seven-and-sixpence a week.

"All right," he said. "I'll come down here to-morrow morning with my luggage."

He went back to Down Street, and spent the evening in packing. As he had a good deal of luggage, he decided to take advantage of the proprietor's offer and leave most of it behind him to be stored. The next morning, accordingly, he presented himself at his new address with only a single portmanteau.

Mrs. Dibbs, the landlady, whose acquaintance he now made for the first time, welcomed him effusively, dispensing a faint odour of whisky and water as she did so. It did not promise well for his future comfort, he thought, and his heart sank a little. The room, too, looked even more cheerless and depressing than it had on the previous day. Still, it would do to sleep in.

As it was nearly twelve o'clock he decided to go down to the theatre at once. The Prince's was a second-rate house in a side street off the Tottenham Court Road, and its reputation was in keeping with its appearance. An atmosphere of failure hung about the whole place, and it looked grimy and generally disreputable.

Adrian found his way round to the stage door and inquired for Mr. Hyem. The man in charge regarded him surlily.

"Voice trial?" he growled.

"Yes."

"All right. Go straight through there."

He jerked his thumb significantly towards a dark passage. Adrian walked along it, and, pushing open a swing door at the end, found himself on the stage. The centre had been screened in by four canvas walls, thus shutting off all but a small space on either side of the proscenium opening. At the back and in the wings, however, there was plenty of room, for the scenery had been taken away.

Adrian glanced round curiously, eager to see how a "voice trial" might be conducted. The portion of the stage where

he stood was crowded with people, each anxiously studying a roll of music. Obviously, they were aspirants for small parts like himself. The men appeared to regard his presence with a certain amount of enmity, seeing in him apparently a dangerous rival. The ladies, however, looked more friendly. Taken all round, they presented rather a depressing sight, for they had a distinctly down-at-heel appearance, despite their plaintive attempts at smartening themselves up by means of imitation jewellery and artificial flowers.

Every few minutes a door cut into the nearest canvas wall opened, and one of the waiting crowd passed quickly through it. Then came the preliminary tinkle of a piano, followed a moment later by the delivery of a song. In each instance only a single verse was rendered. At the end of it an anxious silence ensued, until the next aspirant should be summoned, the former vocalist in the meantime leaving the stage by another exit.

A girl standing beside Adrian looked at him with friendly eyes. She was rather pretty, and her clothes were not marked by the tawdry finery that characterized those of her neighbours.

"You'd better get ready to go on," she whispered, pointing to a line of men forming up at one of the doors. "I don't think they'll try any more girls to-day. I've been brought down here three times this week already."

"Hard lines!" he observed sympathetically.

"Rotten!" she returned, with a wan little smile that went straight to his heart. "Still, it's only what might have been expected. The men always have the best of it. By the way, are you from Hyem's?"

"Yes. Is he any good?"

"Oh, he's about the same as any other agent. That's not saying much, though."

A coarse-featured man standing beside the switchboard turned round, scowling.

"Stop that confounded cackling!" he exclaimed angrily. "I can't hear myself speak. It's a licker to me what some

of you have come here for at all. What do you think this is—a voice trial or a talking match?"

"That's Taylor, the stage manager," whispered Adrian's new acquaintance. "He's a terror!"

As she spoke, a diminutive call boy put his head through the door.

"No more lydies can be heard to-day," he announced shrilly. "Come back same time to-morrow. Now then, gentlemen, please. Basses first, tenors and baritones next."

A murmur of disappointment arose, which even the stage manager could not suppress.

"Well, I'm blowed!" declared one lady indignantly. "And to think that I've been dragged here all the way from Peckham! I'll give Montague a bit of my mind the very next time I see his ugly mug!"

Adrian shot a glance of sympathy at his companion.

"Just my luck," she returned philosophically, as she put the roll of music she had been holding back in its worn cover. "Well, good-bye, and good fortune!"

Adrian took his place in the *queue*, wondering how he would succeed when the moment for the test arrived. He had a fair voice, but there was no knowing beforehand whether it would please the judges or not. He was not left long in doubt, for ten minutes later his turn arrived.

"Cheer oh!" whispered the man behind him encouragingly. "Now then, Caruso, in you go!"

The door swung open and he passed quickly through. Close up against the footlights he saw a small table, at which three men were sitting. One was Montague Hyem, and the other two were strangers. They both had gross, sensual faces, and stared at him in a fashion that filled him with fury.

"Now then, young fellow-me-lad, don't keep us here all day!" exclaimed one. "What's your name?"

"Merrick."

The other scowled at the reply.

"Too much trouble to throw in a sir, I suppose?"

Montague Hyem leaned over the table.

"He's a bit of a novice, Mr. Levenstein," he remarked soothingly.

Then he turned to Adrian.

"This gentleman is Mr. Levenstein. He's the author of the piece."

"And I'm the composer," observed the third member of the trio. "And don't you forget it!"

Adrian bowed. The man who had just spoken seemed rather less of a ruffian than the other.

The author tapped on the table impatiently.

"Now then, what are we waiting for?" he demanded sharply. "What's your voice?"

"A baritone, Mr. Levenstein."

"A wheelbarrow-tone, I expect," replied the great man.

The agent laughed discreetly at this brilliant sally. Then he pointed to a corner of the stage, where a wooden-faced young woman sat at a piano.

"Just step over there, Mr. Merrick, and throw it off your chest, please."

Resigning himself to the inevitable, Adrian walked up to the piano, and rendered the first verse of the song he had brought with him. He was about to commence the second, when he was suddenly interrupted.

"That will do," called out the composer. "We don't want to listen to you all day, you know."

As he withdrew into the wings and waited for the verdict, he could hear the judges' whispered colloquy.

"Well, what do you think?" demanded Hyem.

"He'll do," returned the composer.

"Too much side on him," growled Mr. Levenstein. "Wants taking down a peg or two."

"Still, he's got a good voice," observed the agent insinuatingly.

"And a figure that will fetch the girls," put in the composer.

"Oh, all right!" returned the other, whose decision appeared to be final. "Have it your own way, and don't

argue about it. From the way you two chaps talk, you'd think that every broken-down chorister we've heard to-day was a Hayden Coffin!"

The agent beckoned to Adrian.

"All right, dear boy," he murmured affably. "I've talked Levenstein over. I'll send you your contract to-night and a copy of the script. You'll find it easier to study from than a prompt part."

# XXXIII

MONTAGUE HYEM was as good as his word. By the last post that evening Adrian received from him a long packet, with the "Reliable Agency" stamped on one side and a whisky advertisement sprawling across the flap. Unfastening it, he drew out two enclosures; one was a typed copy of the play, and the other was a contract.

He examined the latter first. By the terms of this document he found himself engaged to sing on tour in the chorus of a "new and original musical comedy," entitled "The Giddy Girls," and to understudy the part of a character humorously named "Lord Doodle," at a salary of thirty shillings a week.

"I wonder how I'll spend it?" he murmured blankly, as he took up the typescript and observed with disgust its greasy brown-paper cover. Then he turned over the pages and began to read through the part allotted him. It seemed more absolutely inane than anything that even the unfettered fancy of a musical comedy librettist could conceive.

"Well, for sheer unadulterated drivel this would take the freehold of a biscuit factory!" he exclaimed in dismay, as he discovered his first entrance—

*Enter* DOODLE, R.C. *Goes down* L. *to* DUKE.

DOODLE. Well met old chappie,
You look quite happy!

DUKE. On my way here I found a shilling.
[*Shows shilling, which* DOODLE *pockets.*

DOODLE. Which now I'll spend if you are willing.

DUKE. It seems you're one of the right sort.
With you I'll have a glass of port.

DUCHESS OF GREASEPAINT *enters from Castle*, L.U.E.

DOODLE (*observing her*). What have we here—a lovely miss?
And one I think I'd like to kiss!
[*Kisses* DUCHESS, *who slaps his face.*

DUCHESS. How dare you, sir, my lips salute?
If you're not off you'll feel my boot!
[*Kicks* DOODLE, *who exits* C.

"Well, this is about the limit!" he reflected blankly, as he threw the sheets into the fire-place.

His first inclination was to write to Hyem at once and withdraw his acceptance. Then he remembered with a pang that this was a luxury which he could not afford. No, he was definitely committed now.

He went to bed feeling utterly miserable, and passed a sleepless night. When at last he managed to doze, he woke up suddenly with a start, dreaming that an infuriated audience was pelting him with rotten eggs. It was only Mrs. Dibbs, however, hammering on the door and inquiring what he wanted for breakfast. With the tray containing it arrived a post card. It was signed by the enterprising Hyem, and ran as follows:—

"'Giddy Girls' Rehearsal Call. Prince's Theatre, 2 p.m. to-day. CHORUS and DOODLE understudy."

On reaching the theatre he found the greater portion of the company already assembled. They were rather a melancholy-looking band on the whole. An air of profound dejection, too, hung over several of them that was quite pathetic to observe.

As his glance wandered round the stage, it fell on the girl who had spoken to him at the previous day's voice trial. She recognized him at once.

"Well!" she said brightly. "I've turned up after all."

"I'm glad to hear it," remarked Adrian politely. "I hope you've got a good part."

"Well, I don't know about that. Still, I mustn't complain, perhaps. It's a bit of luck my getting taken on at all, I suppose. I assure you, things were so desperate with me

yesterday, that I was prepared to take anything—even washing!"

Adrian laughed. The girl's voice had a pleasant ring in it. He wished he knew her name.

"And what is the part?" he inquired.

"Oh, I'm the 'Duchess of Greasepaint.' Dreadful name, isn't it? I have most of my scenes with the man who plays 'Lord Doodle.' He calls himself Mr. Fitzroy Tempest, but his real name is Wilks. He's a horror. Just look at the conceited beast. I wish he'd get ill and give his understudy a chance. I don't know who he is, but he can't be worse."

She pointed to a tall, vulgar-looking man who was engaged at the moment talking to the author. Adrian thought he had never seen quite such an objectionable person before. As he took in his appearance he heard Levenstein's voice rising angrily above the subdued murmur of conversation.

"So you want your part altered, do you, Mr. Tempest?" he was saying. "And why?"

"Because it would injure my reputation," returned the other in accents of extreme dignity. "As it stands, I don't see myself in it properly."

The author snorted impatiently.

"Oh, you don't, don't you? Well, I'm damned if I do, either. You can get out of the theatre. I won't have you in it, or any other swollen-headed barnstormer either. You and your reputation, indeed!"

He waved the other's protests aside, and, turning to the listening group, beckoned to Adrian.

"Look here, Merrick," he exclaimed, "Hyem tells me you understudy 'Doodle.' Well, you'll play the part instead. I suppose you can read music? If not, you'd better learn to. Now then, come along! You and Miss Osborne open the piece. Fetch on the chorus, Taylor, and let's hear 'em bark!"

The stage manager clapped his hands, and a troop of forlorn young women emerged from the wings and took up their position before a faded backcloth.

Mr. Levenstein eyed them angrily. He seemed to be in a worse temper than usual to-day.

"You're a bright lot of beauties to call yourselves 'Giddy Girls'!" he exclaimed witheringly. "I wonder where some of you got blown in from!"

The pianist struck a chord, and the next moment the rehearsal commenced. Adrian found it a dreary business, but he managed to acquit himself of his part with a fair amount of satisfaction. The remainder of the company, however, were not so fortunate, for they were continually being pulled up by the author and made to repeat a scene half a dozen times over. Seated at a small table beside the footlights, with the composer and the stage manager in attendance, Levenstein watched their efforts in sulky anger. Every now and again he stopped the proceedings summarily, in order to indulge in a torrent of abuse.

At last, however, to everybody's unspeakable relief, he rose from his chair.

"I've seen enough for to-day, Taylor," he announced abruptly to the stage manager. "Send this crowd away, or there'll be an inquest directly. They make me ill to look at 'em."

There was a general exit into the wings. Adrian, leaving the theatre, found Miss Osborne beside him.

"Well, what do you think of the first rehearsal?" she inquired.

"I think Levenstein ought to be pole-axed," he returned savagely. "I never saw such a hooligan!"

The next rehearsal took place on the following afternoon. In the absence of the author, it was superintended by the stage manager. Adrian did not find the change much improvement, for Mr. Taylor seemed to combine in his personality all the most objectionable traits imaginable. He was an overbearing, foul-minded individual, who prefaced every word with an oath. However, he appeared to know his business, and he certainly contrived to restore a semblance of order out of the chaos which had prevailed on the previous day.

"Pretty fair rot, this?" he remarked to Adrian, in a moment of expansiveness, during one of the intervals.

Adrian guardedly admitted that it was not his own idea of the high-water mark of dramatic authorship.

"Still, it's quite good enough for the silly fools who'll come to see it," declared the other. "They'll simply eat it in the provinces."

With the exception of Eva Osborne, Adrian scarcely spoke to any of the members of the company. Taking them all round, he considered them a somewhat seedy crew. Most of the men drank, and several of the ladies did so as well. Their familiarity, too, annoyed him beyond words at times. He had no wish to appear unfriendly, but he objected to being clapped on the back and greeted as "dear boy"—the customary form of salutation—by every blue-chinned, untidily-dressed individual who chose to do so. The frantic endeavours of the ladies—from Miss Violet Vavasour (a hand-painted young woman with peroxide of hydrogen dyed hair), who played the "principal boy," down to Miss Birdie Blake, billed as a "dashing soubrette"—to impress him favourably were scarcely less offensive. Several times during the first week's rehearsals he almost resolved to throw the whole thing up in disgust, but the reflection that, if he did so, it might be months before he secured another engagement, invariably restrained him.

"You'd better stick it," counselled Eva Osborne, to whom he once unburdened his mind. "I want to play Juliet, but I'm not breaking my heart because I have to be the 'Duchess of Greasepaint' instead."

During the luncheon interval it was the habit of the company to adjourn to a neighbouring public-house for light refreshments. While the principals gravitated into the saloon-bar, the humbler members would content themselves with the hospitality of the jug-and-bottle department, where they mingled in amicable fashion with scene shifters and stage carpenters. The establishment was situated in Maiden Lane. Its arrangements were frankly theatrical, and it did

a thriving business with the smaller fry attached to the minor places of entertainment in the neighbourhood. These individuals, for the most part, looked distinctly down on their luck, and Adrian often shuddered at their shabby clothes and generally woebegone appearance. He wondered if he should ever get to look like them. The great attraction of the house, in the eyes of many of its *habitués*, was a huge cheese and a basket of biscuits from which patrons were entitled to help themselves freely, provided they first ordered a drink. The wolfish manner in which some of them attacked the food seemed to indicate that it was the only luncheon they could make sure of. More than once Adrian noticed a particularly seedy-looking man surreptitiously filling his pockets with biscuits.

A certain amount of good fellowship prevailed among the establishment's patrons, and, once he had got over his instinctive distaste to their appearance and manners, Adrian found them interesting enough types to study. The leading man, Stanley Lawson, afforded him a great deal of secret amusement. He was a tall, thin man of about thirty-five, with long dank hair and a pallid face, which the ladies declared to be "interesting." He was eaten up with conceit, and, whenever he could secure an audience, he was always talking of the days when he was at the Lyceum with "dear old Irving." His great antipathy was Jerry Snipe, the low comedian, who would freely declare that his sole connection with the historic house had been in the humble capacity of an "extra gentleman."

"Why, I give my word," he declared to Adrian one day, "we were both supers there together. I was a 'shout off,' and Stanley was 'loud applause.' To hear him talk, though, you'd think he ran the blooming place."

After the first two or three days Levenstein ceased to come to the theatre. In his absence the direction of the rehearsals was left to the trusted Taylor. For some reason of his own, this individual would occasionally go out of his way to be almost civil to Adrian. As a rule, he had a

profound and undisguised contempt for the whole company, and would indiscriminately apply the most offensive epithets to them. He quite surprised Adrian by deferring to his opinion at times in a manner that was almost flattering.

One day, when they were talking over the piece together, Adrian made a suggestion which rather appealed to him. Its recipient said nothing about it at the moment, but he came up to him the next morning and took him aside.

"I say," he observed, "I've been thinking over that bright and brainy idea of yours for strengthening the second act. Short of cutting it out altogether, we can't do anything better than alter the dialogue on your lines. You don't mind my doing so, I suppose?"

"Not at all."

"Well, I will, then. By the way, Merrick, you seem to have some ideas. Why don't you write a play yourself? Not a musical comedy, of course, but something worth producing."

"Who would take it if I did?"

"Anyone. Bless you, the managers are simply tumbling over one another to get hold of plays. I was talking to Lucas, of the St. George's, last night. He's on his beam-ends for even a one-act piece. The big pots won't write 'em, and the small fry can't."

"I'll think it over," returned Adrian, in a non-committal tone.

Although he said nothing more about it just then, the idea simmered in his mind. That evening, when he went back to Mrs. Dibbs' dreary house in the Waterloo Road, he dissipated to some extent the chill horrors of his lonely attic by going carefully through the manuscript of the one-act play, "Fancy Free," on which he had once built such hopes. It was, he remembered with a pang, to have been his real introduction into dramatic authorship. Mrs. Bellingham was to have produced it within a month of this very date, and Constance was to have had the leading part.

Well, some one else would have it now—if, indeed, any one.

He took up the closely written sheets and examined them carefully. They brought back a flood of bitter memories. He felt glad, however, that he had not acted on his first wild impulse and burnt the manuscript when it was first returned to him. Yet he had been within an ace of doing so.

As he read on, he began to get genuinely interested. When he came to the last page, he put the sheets together and stared thoughtfully into the dying fire.

"It's not half bad," he murmured. "I'm glad I didn't destroy it, after all. A few more alterations ought to make it quite shipshape."

He sat down at the rickety table, and began to map out some fresh ideas. The flaring gas jet tried his eyes, and he rang the bell for candles.

Mrs. Dibbs raised difficulties at once.

"Candles is an extry," she protested sourly.

"Go and fetch them, and don't talk," replied Adrian. A train of thought had just struck him, and unless he began to work at once it might be too late.

"Well, give us the money," grumbled the other.

Adrian felt in his pockets. He had only a few shillings left now, and every penny was of importance. Unless he were very careful he would not be able to get the play typed.

Mrs. Dibbs tapped on the floor impatiently.

"You don't want me to wait 'ere all night, do you?" she demanded.

"Certainly not," returned Adrian politely. Then he produced a couple of coppers and handed them over.

The landlady folded her arms.

"Candles 'as to be bought by the pound, young man."

"Well, how much does a pound cost?"

A gleam of cupidity crept into the other's watery eye. Here was a lodger who was ignorant of the price of candles. Clearly, Providence had delivered him into her hands.

"A shilling," she answered promptly.

A vague idea that this was considerably above the proper

market rate flashed across Adrian's mind. Mrs. Dibbs saw it, and bridled.

"Which as you seem to doubt my word, sir, you can ask any other lady you like," she declared.

Adrian sighed. The matter was not worth arguing about. He gave the woman the money, glad to be rid of her.

She came back a quarter of an hour later, dispensing a suspicious odour of gin, and inclined to be talkative. However, she brought the candles with her, and that was all that mattered just then.

The moment he was alone he plunged into the work. He made up his mind to re-write portions of the play completely. His experience of the last few weeks had given him an insight into stage requirements that he had hitherto lacked. He saw now how the dialogue could be polished, and how point could be given to the various ideas he was elaborating. It was six o'clock when he began his task, and he continued at it, hour after hour, heedless of how the time was passing. As each guttering candle flickered and died down in a nauseating scent of burning tallow, he would light another. Every now and again, over the dull roar of the traffic, he heard the chimes of Big Ben ringing out, but he took no notice of them, for his work absorbed him completely.

At last he threw down his pen with a sigh of relief. The final page was written, and "Fancy Free" in its new form had been born of the pile of manuscript that littered the table. He had now only to get it typed.

Exhausted with the effort, and feeling faint with hunger —for he had eaten nothing since the middle of the day—he threw open the window and looked out. The cool, still air soothed his aching brow. Across the dark river, gleaming in the moon's rays, he could see the shadowy forms of the long line of buildings that fronted the Embankment. At intervals rose the tall standards of the electric lights. They seemed to throw strange ghostly shadows on the water, and made the swaying barges moored beside the warehouses assume fantastic shapes. From the direction of the bridge,

that cut the water's surface like a huge glistening snake, came a faint breeze. It comforted him mysteriously, for it seemed to whisper a promise that even yet Fortune would smile upon him.

The deep notes of a clock, booming out over the sleeping city, recalled him from his reverie. He counted the strokes, and then turned away with a start.

"Three o'clock!" he exclaimed. "It's high time I was in bed."

# XXXIV

ON his way to the theatre the next morning he left the manuscript at a typewriting office, calling for it again on the way back from rehearsal. A dough-faced young woman was completing the last page when he arrived. As he waited until the work should be finished he watched her countenance anxiously. It was about as expressive, however, as a pudding.

"Well?" he demanded, trying to look unconcerned, "what do you think of it?"

The typist fixed him with a stony glare.

"Think of what?"

"This. It's a play."

The girl's features relaxed into a weak grin.

"Oh, is it?" she returned. "I thought it rather funny."

Adrian groaned internally, and hurried out of the office.

"Rather funny" was the very last epithet that could possibly be applied to "Fancy Free." Well, he would seek no more amateur opinions, but would send the play straight off to a manager and get a professional one.

He dispatched it that night to the lessee of the St. George's Theatre. When he had done so he felt a little happier.

The last rehearsal took place the next day. It was attended by the author, who brought with him a shifty-looking man with beady eyes and a company-promoting nose. He wore a magnificent fur overcoat and an excessively shiny silk hat, which appeared to be stuck on his head by means of gum. At any rate, he never removed it. During the first act he occupied a box, from which he would emerge at intervals to hold a whispered conversation with either

Levenstein or Taylor. The extreme deference they paid him made Adrian think he must be a person of importance.

"Who on earth is that low ruffian?" he inquired at last, during an interval, when the trio had withdrawn into the stage manager's office.

Birdie Blake regarded him with mild amazement.

"Why, that's Charlie Mosenberg!" she declared.

"Indeed! And who is Mr. Mosenberg?"

Violet Vavasour, who overheard the question, laughed in her most superior manner.

"My dear Mr. Merrick, where on earth have you been hiding yourself, not to know that?"

"Startling as it sounds, I haven't heard of the gentleman."

"He's what they call a backer," explained Miss Osborne. "Mr. Levenstein has brought him here in the hope that he'll be so favourably impressed by our talents that he'll put money in the piece."

"When I was with dear old Irving," began the leading man reminiscently, "Mosenberg——"

"Oh, we know all about that!" interrupted Jerry Snipe. "When I was carrying a flag in the pantomime at Drury Lane about twenty years ago, Charlie Mosenberg looked after the box-office. He's on the Stock Exchange now, and has money in half the musical shows there are. If he takes this one up it will be a little bit of all right for us."

Any hopes, however, that the great man would be induced to acquire a financial interest in "The Giddy Girls" were soon rudely dispersed. He sat through the next act in stony silence. When it was over, he leaned over the edge of his box and beckoned to Levenstein.

"I never saw such damned rot in my life!" he announced abruptly. "I'm off now."

The author's face fell.

"But you haven't seen the last act yet," he protested.

Mr. Mosenberg laughed contemptuously.

"And I don't want to, either, my boy. I know when I've had enough. There'll be an inquest if I stop much longer."

Then he took up his gloves and stalked majestically out of the theatre.

Levenstein crossed over to the stage manager.

"That rather queers our pitch," he remarked gloomily.

"Oh, we'll find another mug," was the cheerful retort. "I'm going to meet a silly young Juggins from Oxford this evening. I hear he has money to burn."

Levenstein grinned.

"Well, don't let him see the piece first. We'll be in the cart properly if he does!"

"Trust me for that," returned Taylor, with a wink at Adrian.

The rehearsal was a morning one. The moment it was over the company adjourned, as was their habit, to the bar-parlour of the nearest public-house. The subject under discussion was the tour list, which had just been issued.

"I never saw such a rotten lot of towns," declared the leading man in accents of profound disgust. "The tour will dry up at the end of a fortnight."

"Not if we keep it dark that you're with us, Stanley, dear boy," put in the comedian suavely.

Mr. Lawson glared angrily at the speaker, and, stalking up to the bar, ordered a small bitter.

"Let's see, where do we open?" inquired Adrian, anxious to restore peace.

"Hull first," replied Miss Vavasour. "Then Halifax, and then Chester, Eccles, Macclesfield, and Doncaster. It's a regular Mummers' Creed of a tour!"

"What's that?" demanded Adrian, thirsting for information.

Jerry Snipe laughed.

"'From Hull, Hell, and Halifax.—Good Lord, deliver us!'" he quoted. Everybody laughed. It was one of the most popular theatrical jokes still in regular use.

As the train crawled into the station an hour and a half late on the following Sunday afternoon, Adrian thought he had never seen such a depressing place as Hull. Chill

November was in the air, a drizzling rain was falling, and a keen wind sweeping up the ill-lighted platform went through him like a knife. He tried to prevent it, but his thoughts flew back to the last occasion when he had started out on tour. How different everything had been then! Memories of that happy August morning, and the pleasant journey to Brighton, crowded thick and fast upon him. He saw himself again talking to Constance; her voice rang in his ears. They were walking together on the downs at Rottingdean, or sitting on the pier and looking at the blue sea that danced and sparkled in the sunshine. And now it was all over, and the sad wind howled a dismal requiem for the days that would never return.

He awoke from his reverie and looked at the dejected group standing beside the van from which the luggage was being disgorged. Even Miss Osborne, usually so cheerful and bright, seemed to have caught some of the prevailing depression. She smiled, however, when she saw him. Mr. Levenstein, who, to save a salary, travelled with the company as manager, appeared to be engaged in a heated altercation with the guard on the subject of excess baggage. His strident voice rose above the hurrying footsteps, and his face flushed angrily. At last, however, the argument was settled, and the shabby baskets and trunks were handed over to their owners. Beckoning to an apathetic porter, Adrian collected his belongings and had them piled on a barrow over which Lawson was mounting guard. From motives of economy he had arranged to share rooms with the leading man. He would have preferred a more lively companion, but Jerry Snipe was frankly impossible, and no one else had made overtures to him.

A small boy was engaged to bring the barrow round to their lodgings, and, preceded by him, the two set off through the deepening gloom.

The address for which they were making was situated in a back street near the docks. Adrian's heart sank when he saw the dirty house and the pokey little rooms that he was

condemned to spend the week in. The whole place was cheerless and uncomfortable in the extreme, but it possessed the saving grace of being cheap. On his miserable salary he felt that he could not hope to find anything better.

Stanley Lawson sniffed round the dingy sitting-room, with its stand of wax flowers and Family Bible set out on a rickety table, like an old war horse. The landlady, a sharp-featured woman, watched him from the doorway.

"Well, sir, everything all right?" she queried.

Lawson, who was methodically sprinkling some insect powder over the faded sofa cushions, turned round at the question.

"I don't know yet," he replied blandly. "I'll tell you to-morrow, though."

The landlady sniffed audibly and left the room. Half an hour later she reappeared with a smoking dish of tripe and onions, which Lawson, who was doing the catering, had ordered in advance. Adrian could scarcely touch the slimy mixture allotted him, but his companion polished off a heaped-up plateful without any difficulty.

After one or two vain attempts to get him to talk, Adrian abandoned the effort in despair. The leading man did not shine as a conversationalist. Indeed, the only subject he could discuss at all was himself, and then he merely bored.

The theatre where the week's engagement was to be fulfilled differed considerably from those that had been visited on Mrs. Bellingham's tour. It was a frankly third-rate establishment, and made no pretensions to be anything else. This, perhaps, was as well, for it certainly could not have supported them. It stood in a side street at some little distance from the main thoroughfare, as though ashamed to obtrude itself on the public gaze after the manner of its more successful rivals, and the stage door opened on to a gloomy slum.

If in front of the curtain the building lacked display, things were infinitely worse behind. As the lessee, a local cheesemonger, put it bluntly—"It was no good wasting

money on making actors and actresses comfortable." Dirt and dilapidation were in evidence everywhere; the leaky roof let in the rain on to the rough, uneven stage; and mice scampered freely among the stacks of rotting scenery. The dressing-rooms, too, looked as though they had never known the refining influences of soap and water, and were so limited in number that half a dozen people had to use each. Adrian considered himself lucky when he found that he shared his with only four others.

"Those chaps who write newspaper articles about gay life on tour," observed the comedian, as he threw a boot at a rat that was nibbling a stick of grease paint, "ought to come and see what it's like for a bit. Oh, it's a gaudy experience, and no blooming error!"

Adrian changed his clothes hastily and went down to the stage. There he found Levenstein. The eminent dramatist was wearing a costume which he described as "semi-dress." It consisted of an opera hat and frock coat, in conjunction with a made-up bow tie, low-cut waistcoat, and elastic-sided boots. From the heavy scowl on his face Adrian saw that he was not in the best of tempers.

"What's the house like?" he inquired.

"Rotten," grunted the illustrious author; "but go and look for yourself, young fellow-me-lad."

Adrian peered through the side of the curtain and took a rapid survey of the auditorium. It was not an exhilarating spectacle that he saw there. Immediately below him sat the orchestra—consisting of five men and a boy—ensconced in a sort of railed-off pen. Behind them, scattered about in the stalls, were a few isolated couples, with some forty or fifty others in the circle. The boxes were empty altogether, but both the pit and gallery seemed fairly well filled.

"Strike me lucky!" exclaimed Levenstein, "but we'll have more people on the stage in the second act than there are in the whole house. There's nothing but 'East Lynne' that does any good in the provinces nowadays."

He turned a critical eye on Adrian, who, as "Lord Doodle, an eccentric young peer," was in evening dress.

"You must smarten yourself up a bit, Merrick," he declared. "Why haven't you got a red silk handkerchief stuck in the opening of your waistcoat?"

Adrian smiled.

"Do you think that would be an improvement, Mr. Levenstein?"

The author of "The Giddy Girls" regarded him with mild wonder.

"Of course it would. You're supposed to be one of the aristocracy, aren't you? You ought to have a diamond ring, too. Get one by to-morrow night."

"I'm afraid you must raise my salary first."

"What for?"

"Well, diamond rings are a little expensive."

Levenstein stared blankly, and then broke into hoarse laughter.

"Good Lord! You needn't get a real one. You can buy something that will look just as good for eighteen pence. And, I say, get a watch chain, too, while you're about it. Not a finniking little affair, mind, but something of this sort. There's nothing like dressing a part properly."

He dangled a chain of suspiciously yellow metal, and about the thickness of a ship's cable. Adrian had no time to do more than make a mental note of the horrible thing, for the curtain was just on the point of going up.

He had been confident enough at rehearsals, but now that he had to face an audience it was a different thing. The inanities of the dialogue and songs allotted him seemed more contemptible than ever, and the stupid jokes and antics in which he had to indulge were a veritable torture. A hundred times before the first act was over he found himself wishing that the stage would open and swallow him up. Nevertheless, he managed to struggle through it.

Eva Osborne shot a compassionate glance in his direction. They were waiting in the wings during a brief respite.

"I know it's pretty awful," she whispered, "but one gets used to it in time. Look at Birdie Blake and Mr. Snipe. They're enjoying themselves like anything!"

Adrian turned towards the little comedian and Miss Blake. They were having a scene together, and appeared to be absolutely revelling in it.

At last the curtain came down, and, after a few half-hearted calls for the principals, the audience slowly dispersed. In the passage leading to his dressing-room Adrian met Levenstein. As usual, he seemed annoyed about something.

"Look here, Merrick," he burst out angrily, "this won't do at all."

"What won't do?"

"Why, you weren't playing up half to-night. In that little business you had with Birdie Blake in the second act you were about as lively as a sick caterpillar. And then you didn't give an encore for your first song."

"Well, the audience didn't seem to want it," returned Adrian wearily.

The author snorted indignantly.

"The audience be damned! They don't know what's good for 'em."

Apparently this was also the case with the critics, for when Adrian came down to breakfast the next morning he found his travelling companion poring over a bundle of papers, a heavy frown on his face. He swept the pile across the table.

"Have a look at these," he said. "The silly apes who write this sort of drivel ought to be prosecuted for obtaining seats under false pretences!"

In the first three papers which he examined Adrian found no space at all given to Levenstein's venture, although each had half a column about the rival attractions in the town. A couple of others dismissed the performance with a few contemptuous lines. The last one he took up, however,

rather amused him. It was the sort of notice Marchmont would have written:—

> Last night there was produced at the Queen's Theatre an alleged entertainment, humorously described as "a new and original musical comedy," entitled "The Giddy Girls." Anything less "giddy," however, than the chorus —consisting of a band of forlorn young women in attenuated skirts and bodices that were apparently kept in position by a combination of will-power and stickphast— it would have been difficult to conceive. The piece is certainly "new and original," in that nothing quite like it has ever been seen on the stage before. It is to be sincerely hoped that nothing like it ever will again. The worried expressions of the principals, as they struggled nobly with their parts, seemed to indicate that they had been spending the day looking for the plot. There was one good curtain at the end of the second act. It was the iron one. We would suggest to the author that in future it be lowered sooner, and kept down longer.

"Well, what are you laughing at?" demanded the leading man sharply.

"This notice. It's not wildly humorous, perhaps. All the same, doesn't it strike you as being rather funny?"

"No, it doesn't," was the sulky response. "I consider it an outrage."

Adrian sighed. Short of performing a surgical operation, he would never get his companion to take any other view. Stanley Lawson was a distressing person to live with.

From Hull the company proceeded to Halifax, and thence in succession to Chester, Eccles, and Macclesfield, followed by visits to the smaller Yorkshire and Lancashire towns. At certain places they only remained three nights, making an early start the following morning to reach the next one in time for the evening performance. Adrian hated the life, heart and soul. His days were spent in dreary lodgings, and his nights in draughty, insanitary buildings which, although dignified by the name of theatres, were in reality little better than barns. Some of the dressing-rooms made him

shudder. The grime of ages seemed stamped on their walls, and they were only fit to shelter the vermin with which they swarmed.

The utter loneliness of the life was one of its greatest trials. In the whole company there was scarcely any one but Eva Osborne with whom he felt it possible to talk. He seldom saw her alone, however, and the airs and graces of Miss Vavasour, with whom she lived, soon ceased to be amusing. Stanley Lawson appeared plunged in habitual melancholy, and Jerry Snipe—although entertaining enough—annoyed him by his coarseness. With Levenstein and Taylor, too, he had nothing in common, and the different public-houses where they stayed were not attractive places to visit.

The dreary weeks rolled slowly by, each leaving him more hopeless than ever as to the future. At first he answered advertisements eagerly—his one effort being to get into a London theatre again—but he gave it up when he found that he got no replies worth considering. Most of the demands for "artistes," indeed, appeared to emanate from sharks, and when they were genuine they were unsatisfactory for various reasons. He wrote to Hyem once, but that enterprising agent replied that he had nothing to offer him. The communication was made on a post card, and when the stage-door keeper handed it to him Adrian felt from his manner that it had been circulated round the entire staff of scene shifters and gasmen.

There were more ways than one, however, of getting into a London theatre. If he could not succeed as an actor, he might yet do so as a dramatist. He felt instinctively that he might bring this about in time, although he might have to knock very loudly at the managerial doors first. An idea for a play had occurred to him of late, and he had turned it over in his mind repeatedly until now he saw it all clear and distinct. It was not a masterpiece, he candidly acknowledged. Still, it had good work in it, and, given capable actors and actresses, it ought to be at least fairly successful.

He worked at the play steadily, and with a growing

absorption as the work progressed. Half unconsciously at first, and then deliberately afterwards, he wove into the plot something of his own story. There was a woman in it for whom Mrs. Bellingham might have been the original—a weird combination of Delilah, Monna Lisa, and Mélisande, who, torn by a passionate desire for the love of a certain youth, descended to every depth of meanness. As she planned and schemed to achieve this object, Adrian found himself bringing Constance into the story—first of all as the unsuspected rival, and then as the suspected one on whom the other's jealous rage was vented. He showed in the play how, through this woman's diabolical cunning, the misunderstanding had arisen which led to the hero being condemned unheard by the girl whose heart he had won. It was in the act this episode dealt with that he gave the explanation which Constance had refused to hear when he offered it. By dint of casting the scenes in a French atmosphere, and grafting a counterplot on to the main idea, he flattered himself that no one would recognize any portraits. It was no very great matter if they did. Still, he preferred to avoid the risk.

The title of the play, "Fair Weather Friends," rather pleased him. It seemed to indicate its nature, without giving away the story.

At the end of three months the piece was completed. Then he began to debate where to send it. If only the lessee of the St. George's was not already supposed to be considering his one-act attempt, "Fancy Free," he would have offered this one to him. Finally, however, after much deliberation, he decided to try the manager of the Sheridan. This individual, Arnold Sidney, had the reputation, he knew, of being sufficiently enterprising to exploit untried dramatists from time to time. He would give him a fresh chance of distinguishing himself in this direction.

# XXXV

ONE evening, in the dressing-room of the wretched barn-like theatre in which the company happened to be playing that week, he found Jerry Snipe reading a newspaper. Struck by the fact that it was neither the "Sporting Times" nor "Footlight Bits," he picked it up. In the "poet's corner" he came across some verses taken from a volume by Henley. They seemed peculiarly applicable to himself:

*I gave my heart to a woman,*
*I gave it her, branch and root.*
*She bruised, she flung, she tortured,*
*She cast it under foot.*

*Under her feet she cast it,*
*She trampled it where it fell,*
*She broke it all to pieces,*
*And each was a clot of hell!*

He repeated the lines slowly, deriving a melancholy satisfaction from doing so. He was certainly in hell now, and it was his own blindness that had driven him there! If only he had not shut his ears to the warnings that every one who knew Mrs. Bellingham had given him so freely! If—but what was the good of thinking over the past?

It seemed that Constance had disappeared utterly. Despite every endeavour he could not find the slightest trace of her existence. Since the day preceding the never forgetable one when he had started for Paris, he had not heard a word of her. For all he knew, indeed, she might be dead. During the first few weeks of the tour he searched the theatrical papers eagerly, in the vain hope that he might see her name mentioned as playing somewhere either in London or the

provinces. As week after week went by, however, without his lighting upon it, he gave up the attempt.

Once he wrote to Hyem, for it occurred to him that Constance might possibly apply to the "Reliable Agency" for an engagement. But here, again, he met with no better success. The impresario of the Waterloo Road could tell him nothing. "Never heard of your lady friend," was the sole reply vouchsafed.

From time to time he saw a reference to Mrs. Bellingham.

As the "Whitehall" Company were only visiting the larger towns, while the Levenstein tour was strictly confined to the "Number Two's," Adrian never came across any of his old acquaintances. He was always afraid, however, that he would do so some day. It was with a distinct feeling of relief, accordingly, that he read of the company's return to London early in December. It would still further reduce the chance of meeting any of them, for "The Giddy Girls" were to continue their adventurous career until Easter.

Christmas came and went, and the New Year dawned dull and cheerless. Adrian spent it in wretched lodgings in a small Lancashire town, where the inhabitants consisted principally of mill-hands. A heavy fall of snow, which had swept over the country during the last few days, added to the other discomforts. As he tramped through the slush at night, the misery and utter hopelessness of his position seemed redoubled. He wondered drearily if he would have to go on in the same way to the end of the chapter, cutting absurd antics and speaking ridiculous dialogue for six nights a week in third-rate theatres, and spending his Sundays on wearisome railway journeys. And then the hours when he was not actually working. They were almost the worst of all, for he had nowhere to spend them but in the dreary lodgings with Lawson for a companion.

And once he had thought touring would be jolly!

Well, he knew better now, and he had paid heavily for the knowledge. He hated touring and everything connected therewith, and his hatred increased with every day's experience. The life was loathsome in the extreme. Once

he could get a London engagement—in however humble a capacity—nothing would induce him to go into the provinces again.

But London seemed as far off as the stars.

A circumstance that made this particular tour more unpleasant than it would, perhaps, otherwise have been was that the financial results were so poor. For some little time past the company had been giving "three night stands," and had scarcely managed to do more than clear expenses. Then it failed to do even that. In vain did Levenstein grumble and swear, and cut the chorus down to the most attenuated proportions imaginable. Audiences became more and more scanty, and "business" grew steadily worse.

"If this goes on much longer," declared Jerry Snipe ruefully, "we'll dry up. There were two men and a boy in the pit to-night—one less than yesterday."

Adrian sighed. Playing to empty benches was not exhilarating.

As he left the theatre that evening with the leading man, to return to the rooms they shared together, a newsboy fluttered a placard before him. On it, in huge letters, he read the words:

"BANKRUPTCY OF A FAMOUS ACTRESS"

Lawson stopped, and fingered a coin.

"I wonder who it is?" he observed meditatively.

"Oh, probably some chorus girl!" declared Adrian, who was in a hurry to get back. "Come along!"

"I think I'll have a ha'p'orth, all the same," returned the other.

He bought a paper and unfolded it beneath a lamp-post. Then he turned to Adrian with a startled exclamation.

"I say!" he burst out. "Who do you think it is?"

"I don't know at all. There are so many famous actresses nowadays. It's not likely to be anybody I know, all the same."

"I suppose not. I know the lady, though. It's Mrs. Bellingham."

Adrian seized the paper eagerly, and devoured the paragraph which the other indicated. It ran as follows:

> Considerable interest has been aroused of late in theatrical circles by the reported financial difficulties of a certain popular actress. These culminated this morning in the issue of a receiving order against Mrs. Bellingham, the well-known lessee and leading lady of the Embankment Theatre. We understand that, at the instance of the petitioning creditor (a firm of costumiers), an execution was recently levied upon Mrs. Bellingham's household effects in Hans Place. These are to be sold by auction on Monday next. It is understood that the deficit will be an extremely large one, as the debtor's theatrical ventures have been carried on at a heavy loss for some time past. In consequence of her pecuniary embarrassments, Mrs. Bellingham has been compelled to abandon the provincial tour on which she is at present engaged. An interview with this charming and accomplished lady (to whom we tender our sincere sympathies for her unmerited misfortune) appears on another page. It is contributed by Mr. Raphael Montagu, the distinguished theatrical journalist.

Adrian read the news with a certain amount of satisfaction. Mrs. Bellingham a bankrupt! Well, it served her right!

"What will she do now?" he asked. "I suppose this business will kill her professionally?"

His companion gave a short laugh.

"Oh, she'll come out on top all right. Grace Bellingham isn't the sort of woman to let a little trifle like this upset her. If the worst comes to the worst, and she can't find another mug to finance her, she'll go on the music-hall stage and make a hundred and fifty a week as easy as winking. I should think she'll welcome being made a bankrupt, as she will be able to avoid paying her company now. She's quite mean enough for that."

"You know her, then?"

"I should think I did. There's not a pro who doesn't. I was in her company once, but I wouldn't be in it again for ten quid a week. Ask Levenstein what he thinks of the dear lady. He can pitch you some pretty tales about her!"

The next morning's London papers, which arrived in the afternoon, went more into details. Adrian read half a dozen interviews, which had been granted "with extreme reluctance," in the more important journals, and as many imaginary accounts of the distinguished bankrupt's career in those organs whose representatives she had declined to see. He realized with disgust that the Press were making a heroine of her. As Lawson said, she was being written up as though she had done something to be proud of. It sickened him to read the fulsome nonsense that the papers talked. A suggestion was even put forward in one widely circulated daily that a public subscription should be got up for her benefit; and a second opened its columns to a correspondence denouncing the "greed" of her creditors. Adrian was not altogether surprised when, three days later, somebody showed him the announcement of Mrs. Bellingham's forthcoming appearance at a Sunday League Concert at the Alhambra.

"Well, there's nothing like having a pretty good nerve," observed Eva Osborne critically. "I wish I'd come in for more of it when it was being served out!"

The delay exhibited by the manager of the St. George's Theatre in arriving at a decision respecting "Fancy Free" seemed unwarrantable. The play had been in his hands now for nearly five months. At last, when he felt he could wait no longer, Adrian sent a polite letter of inquiry respecting its fate. A week, during which he lived on tenterhooks of anxiety, passed without any reply being vouchsafed. Then, when he came down to breakfast the next morning, he saw an ominous-looking packet lying on the table. Although he knew instinctively what it was, he opened the parcel. As he thought, it was his play returned.

On a typed slip of paper attached to the cover were a few words from the manager:—

> *Mr. Frederick Lucas has read the accompanying play with much interest. While recognising its high intrinsic merit, he greatly regrets that it scarcely appears suitable for production at the St. George's Theatre. The manuscript is accordingly returned herewith.*

It was evidently the stereotyped form of "Declined with thanks" employed at the St. George's.

Adrian swore for five minutes. He had built great hopes on Lucas's favourable opinion, and it was not soothing to have his work thrown back at him after all this delay.

"The swine might have had the decency to have made up his alleged mind a bit sooner," he muttered. "I suppose the Sheridan man will fling back the other one now."

He went down to the theatre, feeling more depressed and miserable than usual. It seemed no good trying any longer. Unless he were in London, and in actual contact with them, none of the managers would listen to him.

Just outside the theatre, where she had been calling for her letters, he met Eva Osborne. She stopped when she saw him.

"The door-keeper has a wire for you, Mr. Merrick," she announced.

"It can't be for me," he returned.

"Well, it's addressed to you at any rate, and chance it."

Adrian hurried up the steps and entered the gloomy little den which the stage-door keeper inhabited. He took the telegram, his fingers trembling with excitement as he tore it open. Then he smoothed out the form and read the message:—

*Call here at once. Sidney. Sheridan Theatre.*

He turned into the nearest post office and sent off a reply.

*Wire received. What do you want me for? Merrick.*

Two hours later the reply arrived:—

*Come and see.*

Adrian stared at it doubtfully, wondering if it meant good news or not.

"H'm," he murmured. "The beggar's not very chatty, but he seems to mean business."

Then he dispatched an answering wire to say that he would call at twelve o'clock the following morning.

The next step was to announce his intended departure to

Levenstein. The manager did not appear altogether pleased at the intimation. He brightened up, however, when he learned Adrian's reason for going.

"So you've sent Arnold Sidney a play, 'ave you, young feller-me-lad?" he observed, with heavy geniality. "Well, you must 'ave a cheek! He's not at all likely to accept it, though. You've no idea how particular he is. Why, he actually refused 'The Giddy Girls' from me!"

"All the more chance for 'Fair Weather Friends,' then," thought Adrian.

He went up to town the next morning, a ray of hope—the first he had experienced for months—accompanying him on the journey. Surely the lessee of the Sheridan would not summon him to London without very good reason.

# XXXVI

MR. ARNOLD SIDNEY, sole lessee and manager of the Sheridan Theatre, was an individual with strong views on the subject of theatrical management. Towards this he brought to bear a considerable amount of business acumen, combined with artistic instinct of a high order. It was his legitimate boast that he gave better value for money than any of his competitors. Possessed of considerable private means, he was enabled to indulge his fancy freely. He had ideas of his own, and put them into practice without caring in the least whether they were conventional or not. The majority were anything but conventional. Their projector, however, never permitted this matter to trouble him in the least, for he was serenely indifferent to everybody's opinion.

Under his able guidance, the Sheridan was looked upon, and with good reason, as a gold mine. The mouths of speculators watered when they regarded the comfortable little house, situated in the very heart of theatre-land, with the long list of successful productions to its credit. Had the lessee cared to have gone into the market at any time since he first took over the reins of management, he could have obtained unlimited capital. He preferred, however, to be "on his own," as he termed it, and he certainly conducted the Sheridan with a success that fully justified this attitude of aloofness.

A strong factor in Arnold Sidney's prosperous career was that he had the courage of his opinions. Some of these required a good deal. He worked indefatigably, and made

everybody else in his employment do the same. Each production he undertook was an advance upon its predecessor. "The Sheridan productions are the best!" would have been his motto, had he possessed such a thing. He had no belief in reputations, and would cast a well-known actor for a minor part, or promote an unknown one to a position of importance, as seemed good to himself. When the members of his company resented—as they often did—this revolutionary attitude, he would meet them by summarily dispensing with their services. He preserved the same lofty spirit of independence towards dramatists. If an author wrote for him he had to do so in accordance with his ideas, or not at all. In his own theatre he was supreme, and he ruled the establishment with a rod of iron. There might have been a velvet glove, but very little of it was ever seen.

To Arnold Sidney names were of but little importance. He judged the plays he accepted, and the people who appeared in them, on their merits. The dramatist without a reputation received as much attention at his hands as the one already well dowered with such an asset. Ability was the sole passport he recognized. Before it, his stage door flew open readily.

When Adrian's play reached him he happened to be exceptionally busy. Accordingly, he handed the manuscript to his typist to make a preliminary report upon. That young woman's verdict of "sweet" almost determined him to return it instantly. On more mature reflection, however, he decided to read it himself when he had time. Plays worth anything at all were not too numerous, and there was always a chance that the budding Barrie lurked somewhere among the pile of attempts weighing down his desk. He did not feel inclined to take the risk of denying him admission when he came.

Six weeks elapsed before the turn of "Fair Weather Friends" arrived for consideration. Then, with this in one pocket, and a blank verse drama by an ambitious countess in the other, the manager went off to take a Turkish bath.

The fate of the latter effort was decided in the cooling-room, but "Fair Weather Friends" survived the ordeal better. The title appealed to Sidney, and his practised eye soon recognized that the author, whoever he might be, knew the stage and its requirements thoroughly.

The writing gripped him from the first page. There was a strength and freshness about it, combined with an excellent central idea, that he had not come across for a long time past. His cigar went out, but he read on enthralled.

"Well, this chap can write," he muttered as he came to the last line. "I won't decide anything, though, until I've had another look at it."

He read each act through again before he left the building. Then he went back to the theatre, feeling that he was on the verge of something like a discovery. As to the identity of the author, he neither knew nor cared. The only matter of importance was that Adrian Merrick—who, to judge from his address, appeared to be a member of some third rate touring company—had written a play that was at least marketable. As it happened, he was in want of one just then, for the eminent dramatist who had been commissioned to supply the Sheridan with its next production had suddenly gone off to Monte Carlo, to "think out" a new fourth act.

The idea of "Fair Weather Friends" simmered in Arnold Sidney's brain for several days. The more he thought it over, the more he liked it. Plot, construction, and dialogue were all good. The acting possibilities alone gave him uneasiness. Unless very deftly handled the success of the piece would be in jeopardy. Everything depended on the parts being played sympathetically. How to cast them was accordingly a problem.

He ran over his prospective cast-list critically, weighing the rival claims of one person after another with extreme care. Half of them, he reflected with a sigh, were ineligible, since they happened to be in management for themselves. At last he settled to his satisfaction the entire company, with but one important exception. This was that of the leading lady.

Who to engage for it confronted him with a serious difficulty. Once more the play's fate trembled in the balance.

Arnold Sidney frowned as he gazed at the sheet of note-paper on which he had scribbled his prospective cast-list. He was trying to think of a girl he had seen by chance at a suburban theatre during the previous week, but her name eluded him for the moment. The piece had been ridiculous, and the company as a whole quite second-rate, but this particular performance had stamped itself upon his memory, and he had mentally resolved to enlist its interpreter for his next production at the Sheridan.

Suddenly, the name came back to him. The moment it did so, for he was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet, he sent the bearer an invitation to call upon him. Two days later he saw his way sufficiently clear ahead to wire for the author. Then, feeling thoroughly satisfied with the turn of events, he busied himself in other directions.

The day after he received the managerial summons Adrian arrived at the theatre, alternating between hope and despair. He knew that "Fair Weather Friends" was good, but whether it was good enough for acceptance was another thing altogether. As he waited at the stage door while his name was sent up, grim forebodings seized him, and he saw himself leaving the building again in five minutes' time with the manuscript under his arm.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, the telephone bell rang sharply.

"Mr. Sidney will see you, sir," announced the door-keeper. "Kindly go up to his office."

The manner in which he was received instantly put Adrian at ease. Sidney shook hands with him cordially, and drew up a chair beside his desk.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Merrick," he observed. "You've had a long journey from Wigan, I'm afraid, but I've not asked you to make it without a very good reason."

Glancing at the desk, Adrian saw a familiar packet of

typed sheets. The sight gave him confidence. Then a black fear seized him.

"Is—is it about my play?"

The other smiled encouragingly.

"Yes. This is it—'Fair Weather Friends'—a good title, and a good bit of work, too. I congratulate you on it heartily, Mr. Merrick."

Adrian's spirits went up with a sudden bound.

"Do you really like it, then?"

"Well," was the tranquil reply, "I should scarcely have asked you to travel a couple of hundred miles to hear me say I didn't. What I wanted to see you about was to say that I'm prepared to produce the piece here in six weeks' time—to make it my next production, in fact—provided we agree as to terms."

"Oh, there'll be no difficulty on that score," declared Adrian, who would cheerfully have parted with all his rights for sixpence.

"I hope not," returned the other drily. "You shall have the same terms as any one else who works for me—a hundred pounds down, and a ten per cent royalty on the gross. What do you say?"

"I'll be delighted!" returned Adrian simply, overjoyed beyond measure at what he had just heard.

"That's settled, then. Now, tell me, have you submitted this play elsewhere by any chance?"

"No, but if you had refused it I should have tried the St. George's."

"H'm! it might suit Lucas, but Mrs. Lucas as the heroine wouldn't do the piece much good. Actor-managers are bad enough, but actor-managers' wives are about the limit. I sometimes think that a short Act ought to be passed—one might call it 'An Act for the Preservation of the British Drama'—making it illegal for any actor-manager to employ his wife as leading lady."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," returned Adrian. "By the way, how will you cast this piece?"

A faint smile crept over the other's impassive face.

"That's one of the things I want to discuss with you. An author's ideas on the subject are valuable. I presume you yourself would be prepared to play 'Blantyre,' the young lover? I think you can do it satisfactorily, as I hear you were at the Embankment with Mrs. Bellingham. As for the other characters, I can fix them up easily enough. I suppose there's nobody—no friend of yours, that is to say—you'd like me to engage particularly?"

Adrian was silent for a moment. There was one name he would have given anything he possessed to see cast for the leading part. Something, however, forbade him mentioning it.

"No," he answered slowly. "I don't think so."

Arnold Sidney looked at him curiously, an inscrutable smile hovering about the corners of his mouth.

"Sure?" he demanded. "No lady, for example?"

Adrian started at the directness of the question.

"Who have you thought of for 'Miss Graham,' the girl's part? You've told me about all the others."

The manager seemed amused at the question.

"Some one of whom I think you'd approve," he replied. "For the moment, though, I won't say who it is, beyond that it is some one who has been in America for the last six months. In fact, she only returned a week ago. The day before yesterday I sent her the play to read."

"And what did she say?"

"She tells me that if you approve of her, she'll be delighted to accept the part. I've asked her to meet you here this morning, so that you can both talk it over. As a matter of fact, if you will go into the next room I fancy you will find her waiting there already."

Adrian looked at the speaker sharply. His heart began to beat furiously.

"Some one who has just come back from America?" he echoed, scarcely able to believe his ears. "Does she know me?"

Arnold Sidney swung round in his chair and faced him.

"That was the impression I rather gathered from our interview," he returned imperturbably. "Now suppose you go and settle the matter for yourself. Come back in ten minutes' time."

With a wild sensation surging up into his brain, and a strange feeling that some great mystery was about to be solved, Adrian left the room. An idea that he tried vainly to dismiss, for its utter improbability, held him. He reeled at the thought.

"Dear God! if only I see her again!" he murmured, as he paused outside the threshold. Then, unable to endure the suspense any longer, he opened the door and entered the room.

Some one sitting beside the window rose slowly. The next moment a slight girlish form turned, with hands outstretched in a little gesture of invitation. Under their long lashes two violet eyes looked steadily into his.

Adrian caught at his breath sharply. It could only be a dream, and he would wake up again directly. Then he came a step nearer.

"Constance!" he exclaimed wonderingly, and held his breath for the answer.

She shrank back as he spoke, and would have covered her face with her hands, but he held them fast.

"Constance!" he cried again, whelmed in a glad assurance that his doubts were at an end. "Ah, you have come back to me at last! I'll never let you go now."

She lifted a radiant face to his, a new light shining in her eyes.

"Adrian!" she whispered shyly. "Do you really want me —after everything?"

His arm stole round her slender waist and drew her closer to him.

"Because of everything. Dear heart, if only you knew how much I've wanted you!"

Constance heaved a little sigh of happiness.